

Statement on Sensationalist Animal “Training” on Television

Television networks and streaming entertainment outlets continue to produce sensationalist animal training shows that are not true representations of the unhurried and careful approach that good animal training mandates. These shows feature largely self-taught individuals with no demonstrable knowledge or skill in the art and science of animal training and who employ outdated methods and dangerous concepts, including excessive punishment, dominance-based methods, behavioral flooding, and setting up the animal to engage in an undesired behavior in order to “teach them a lesson.” These types of shows highlight approaches that cause significant harm to our animal companions and the human-animal bond. Forcing an animal to encounter something it fears without escape, or behavioral flooding, is cruel and inhumane. Physically punishing an animal and using tools like shock collars, scat mats, prong collars, collar corrections, spray bottles, or physical hitting is not acceptable because of the pain and discomfort it causes and the potential for making behavioral problems worse. This puts the animals at higher risk for surrender to shelters. Film crews highlight the temporary suppression of behavioral responses which create the illusion that the animal is “rehabilitated” or “calm and submissive.” The reality is that after they turn off the cameras, the fear, anxiety, or aggression will often resurface and may be increased.

We know a better way. Peer-reviewed literature continues to demonstrate that the use of positive reinforcement is the most humane and effective approach (see a short list of references below). Knowledgeable trainers, who do not set animals up to fail, identify an appropriate alternative behavior, train the behavior using positive reinforcement, and then teach the animal to offer that wanted behavior instead of the unwanted behavior. Skilled trainers do not force an animal to “face its fears.” Skilled trainers know how to employ humane techniques, such as counterconditioning to gradually help an animal feel more comfortable with things they fear without evoking that fear response. Networks may not find it engaging, yet it is solid and beneficial training, and it is effective.

We are not alone in this position. Leading animal training, animal welfare, and veterinary organizations promote the use of positive reinforcement-based training. Animals are successfully trained for general companionship, but also for police, military, and service work using positive reinforcement. In fact, the use of positive reinforcement has been shown to improve working dog performance. Respected national and international animal training certifying bodies require certificants and members to adhere to the Least Intrusive, Minimally Aversive (LIMA) ethical standard, which states, “LIMA does not justify the use of punishment in lieu of other effective interventions and strategies. LIMA requires trainers and consultants to work to increase the use of positive reinforcement and eliminate the use of punishment” (IAABC, 2020). LIMA-based trainers are not only skilled, but educated as they are required to continue the study of the art and science of animal behavior in order to maintain certifications.

What can show producers do instead? There are several shows that demonstrate positive reinforcement to solve animal behavior problems: Victoria Stillwell’s *It’s Me or the Dog*, Jackson Galaxy’s *My Cat from Hell*, *Nightmare Pets SOS* on BBC with Chirag Patel and *Cats and Dogs at War* with Chirag Patel are excellent examples. All of these show the use of positive reinforcement to solve behavior problems without the fallout and dangers of using outdated methods. There are also YouTube channels on which to model content, including KikoPup with Emily Larham, who is the world record holder for the most dog tricks performed in one minute.

We invite television and streaming outlet producers to consider the significant and negative impact of prioritizing entertainment over animal welfare on animals across the globe.

Consumers can find valuable information about positive reinforcement training on our website, shelterdogplay.org. Consumers can also find a positive reinforcement trainer near you by visiting any of the following websites: the Association of Professional Dog Trainers website: apdt.com; on the International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants website: iaabc.org; on the Certification Council for Pet Dog Trainers website: CCPDT.org; the Karen Pryor Academy for Animal Training website: clickertraining.com; Victoria Stillwell’s Academy for Dog Training and Behavior’s website: vsdogtrainingacademy.com; and The Academy for Dog Trainers’ website: academyfordogtrainers.com.

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