

# The Gentle Way

By Susan Henderson©

*"There is great force hidden in a sweet command."*

## *WHAT IS WRONG WITH THE CONFRONTATIONAL METHODS USED BY SOME TRAINERS, AND AREN'T THERE BETTER WAYS?*

Yanking a dog up by the scruff of the neck, overturning it and pinning it down on its back and staring into its eyes (all naturally read by the dog as signs of aggression) is one example of the bad training technique favoured by practitioners of the popularized but increasingly discredited Alpha Dominant school of thought which is based largely on false premises.

This style of training was thought to mimic methods of establishing dominant leadership among wild wolves, but research has shown that this is not in fact the way of wolves. Secondly, the domestic dog has evolved enormously from its wolf origins over a period of more than forty thousand years in the company of humans and our ancestors. We recognize humans as distinct from chimpanzees, and so should we distinguish between wolves and dogs. There are similarities but so are there differences. Emphatically, then, a dog is not a wolf.

Healthy, well-socialised dogs do not pin one another down. They are naturally confused, threatened and frightened if forced into submission in this way. And what damage are we inflicting on the dog's mind when this aggressive treatment is meted out by someone they are expected to respect, trust and love? What effect do we expect this deed to have on the dog's natural self-defence mechanism? How would we react to such abuse?

By forcing a dog into an alpha roll or performing other aversive techniques, we risk destroying the natural willingness to trust and respect, which is a prized characteristic of our domestic dog. The use of such force in training may achieve a specific objective at a superficial level but will do nothing to cultivate the deeper and enduring understanding we should be aiming for.

A dog forced into tenuous submission is liable to suffer from learned helplessness, fearing attack if it makes an unintentional mistake. It may also have difficulty permanently containing a concealed frustration borne of repression and hurt, manifesting eventually as an attack on the closest available target. This touches on energy displacement activity: there is an adaptive release mechanism controlling the build-up of aggressive energy which if suppressed may result in an extreme eruption of redirected aggression

Another example of the confrontational approach is the Scruff Shake which involves grasping your dog with both hands around the scruff of the neck and shaking it from side to side while scolding and staring aggressively into the eyes. The dog may also be lifted off the ground and then dropped without warning. This was supposed to replicate the mother dog's disciplining of puppies, but as canine behaviourist Jean Donaldson points out, the only reason for a mother doing this to her puppies would be with the intention to kill them, which is not normal and is extremely rare. This kind of treatment is again based on misinformation and may result in whiplash injury or micro brain haemorrhages.

Still another technique in the repertoire of the harsh training school is Stringing Up. The dog is pulled off the ground by means of a short leash until, gasping for breath, it submits to the trainer's command. Common sense, not medical training, is all that is required in the acknowledgement of this kind of technique as cruel and harmful. A study has shown that over 90% of dogs with

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anomalies in the cervical region of the neck had a history of pulling on a leash or were subjected to check-chain corrections. Imagine the physical consequences of ‘stringing up’. This area of the neck also contains the vulnerable hyoid bone which could be fractured. Such rough treatment can also cause compression damage to the nerves of the pharynx and larynx. Further, imagine the consequences of this kind of training if you had taken in a rescue dog which, unknown to you, had a collapsed vertebra in the neck and was then treated to Stringing Up by some uninformed trainer!

There is potential for unintentional abuse and harm when unsuspecting dog-owners try these rough methods on their pets, copying the unfortunate model set by established trainers whose disposition is not all it is made out to be or whose methods are not informed by the more enlightened insights of today.

If we take as an example the problem of a dog who is fear-aggressive towards other dogs (in other words, the aggression is fear-based and meant to be protective rather than wilfully confrontational), the solution would likely be sought by the aversive handler by forcing the frightened dog into another’s company while it wears a shock-collar (e-collar or vibration collar as modern marketing has it) and perhaps a muzzle which renders it defenceless. The troublesome reactions from this dog, forced into the situation that terrifies it, would be met with a shock and a jerk from the collar. Is it possible that there is sense in this method?

Imagine treating a snake-phobic person in this way. They’d be constrained and forced into close proximity with the object of fear and shocked when they react. You will probably agree that the results are likely to be unbearably traumatic rather than therapeutic and that there must be a better way. The snake-phobic person’s amygdala, the most primitive part of the brain, takes control in the interest of safety and the reaction is flight or fight. This is survival mode which makes the subject react instantly in order to avoid danger. There may be many psychological background problems to deal with. The condition is shocking enough without adding a shock as an element in aversion therapy.

The dog that is fear-aggressive to other dogs will become even more reactive if forced into the company of other dogs as the amygdala is over-activated. There is a need to recondition the dog’s perception of other dogs, to teach it that they are not intrinsically threatening. The way to achieve this properly is a slow process by way of very gradually increased exposure to the perceived threat at distances tolerable to the reactive dog, over time reducing the distance within the dog’s tolerance level. Attempts to rush this are likely to result in regression. Over-activating the fight or flight response invariably leads to chronic stress and in turn to various illnesses or coping mechanisms such as learned helplessness. A new non-threatening experience needs to overcome an ingrained reaction that has been self-perpetuating. This is slow, but it is a non-violent healing procedure.

Behaviour modification is achieved not from threatening the dog with punishment for its failures, but from inducing the dog to volunteer its co-operation. Nine times out of ten, the dog’s refusal to co-operate can be attributed to error in the trainer’s approach. Trainers who are able to ‘read’ the dog and communicate with it clearly, informed by a wide knowledge and experience as well as an intuitive understanding and a lot of patience, are best equipped to deal with difficult problems. Choose your trainer with care.

*Handbook of Applied Dog Behaviour and Training voll,2 and 3 by Steven R. Lindsay; Dominance in Dogs fact or fiction? By Barry Eaton; Difficult Dogs by Vanessa Steed; Dog behaviour, evolution and cognition by Ádám Miklósi; APDT The Dog Trainer’s Resource : Editor Mychelle E. Blake; Aggression in Dogs by Brenda Aloff; Dog Language by Roger Abrantes; Canine Body Language by Brenda Aloff; Dog Owner’s Home veterinary handbook 3e:James M. Griffin, MD & Liisa D. Carlson DVM; Back Problems in Dogs “Research Reports” by Anders Hallgren*