



Veterinarians Concerned About Outdated and Confrontational Advice Given by Cesar Millan *The Dog Whisperer*

In an article written by Timothy Kim for the VIN News Services (5FEB09), an on-line resource for veterinarians, representatives of the American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior (AVSAB) have expressed concern about dog training advice given by Cesar Millan, on his reality TV show, *The Dog Whisperer*. The AVSAB is so concerned that they have issued an official statement (Position Statement on the Use of Dominance Theory in Behavior Modification of Animals - <http://tiny.cc/BoliX>) to counter the unfortunate pervasive influence of Millan's show.

In their position statement the AVSAB demonstrates that the dominance theory which is the core of Millan's approach, has been rejected by animal behavior experts and can actually cause serious fear aggression in dogs. In the article, Dr. Laurie Bergman, of Norristown, Pa., a member of AVSAB's executive board was quoted as saying "We had been moving away from dominance theory and punitive training techniques for a while, but, unfortunately, Cesar Millan has brought it back."

Dominance theory has typically been presented as the reason for a dog's misbehavior. Its basic premise is that the dog is a pack animal like a wolf and all packs are ruled by the dominant alpha male. Millan essentially believes that in order to counter a dog's misbehavior, or as he sees it a "grab for power," a person must be the dominant alpha male and must use force and coercion to get the dog to behave and submit.

The article describes Millan as using a number of assertive techniques "...negative-reinforcement, or correction... alpha rolls (the dog is rolled onto its back, a submissive position) and flooding (the dog is exposed to something that causes it anxiety and is not allowed to escape, to desensitize it). He also has been shown choking a dog on the end of a leash until it fell onto its side, gasping for air." These techniques are of great concern to the AVSAB which has also adopted a position statement on the use of punishment for training animals (<http://tiny.cc/p5jYg>).

The theory of dominance hierarchy was set into motion in 1922 by Thorleif Schjelderup-Ebbe and his research on chickens. It was popularized by the Monks of New Skete with their publication of *How to Be Your Dog's Best Friend*. This now very dated book, takes the premise that if we want the best relationship with our dog then we should treat them like an adult wolf would treat a wolf puppy, at least according to the Monk's understanding of that scenario. Many of their key recommendations focus on fear and physical punishment.

Thanks to the work of Dr. L. David Mech, a senior scientist with the U.S. Geological Survey, we now know that dominance theory does not apply to wolves in a natural, wild (non-captive) environment (Alpha Status, Dominance, and Division of Labor in Wolf Packs)



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(<http://tiny.cc/ycQeU>). Research by Dr. Ray and Lorna Coppinger (*DOGS: A New Understanding of Canine Origin, Behavior, and Evolution* (Scribner, NY, 2001; Univ. Chicago Press, 2002) has helped us understand that while closely related to the wolf a dog is not a hunter or a pack animal. Dogs are primarily scavengers and when living feral often live alone or in very loose groups.

So what does all of this mean? It means that the dominance theory spouted for years by many in the dog community is a poor model for describing wolf behavior and is an even worse model for training your dog. Unfortunately, just like there is still a Flat Earth Society there are still those like Cesar Millan, who hang on to a dog training model that is erroneous and based on creating confrontation and fear.

The AVSAB is not the first to question Millan's techniques. On February 23, 2006 the New York Times quoted Dr. Nicholas Dodman [veterinary behaviorist and director of the Animal Behavior Clinic at Tufts University] as saying "My college thinks it [The Dog Whisperer – Cesar Millan] is a travesty. We've written to National Geographic Channel and told them they have put dog training back 20 years." Later that same year the American Humane Association stated "The training tactics featured on Cesar Millan's "The Dog Whisperer" program are inhumane, outdated and improper"

Kim's article concludes with a statement by Dr. Sophia Yin, a member of the AVSAB executive board, warning dog guardians to avoid dog trainers and others who: continually tell owners that they have to be the "alpha," warn owners not to use rewards too much, and uses pinch collars or shock collars on dogs in a training class. "The AVSAB recommends that veterinarians not refer clients to trainers or behavior consultants who coach and advocate dominance hierarchy theory and the subsequent confrontational training that follows from it."

All of us at Green Acres wholeheartedly endorse the AVSAB's recommendations.

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