

Choosing a Trainer

By Kathy Gibson, Custom Canine

“The role of humans is to tend the garden. The act of tending a garden, as any gardener knows, involves loving attention. Frequent strolls through the garden are mandatory, just to check in with what’s happening...A relationship is established in which the garden silently communicates its needs and desires, to those with ears to hear. Any good gardener knows that there is a genius particular to each piece of land, which determines what will flourish. Unilaterally imposing our will upon the landscape will lead to disappointment. Our best gardeners operate not as masters over the garden, but as one intelligent source of creativity among other centres of creative intelligence, the plants.”

Darwin, Divinity and the Dance of the Cosmos, An Ecological Christianity

Bruce Sanguin, CopperHouse Kelowna 2006. pp. 37-38

I have worked with thousands of people and their dogs. The one thing I see every time I go to a home is that, at some level or another, people really understand their dogs. In teaching, I believe that one of my main roles is to empower people to understand that they have this knowledge. My next task is to help them use this knowledge to co-create a healthy, happy relationship with their dogs.

Looking for someone to help you work with your dog can be a confusing and sometimes frightening process. But once you understand you can trust yourself, you will be able to choose the kind of trainer that will help you with your dog in a way that will be good for both you and your dog.

The most important point always to keep in mind and to follow is...**do nothing that you believe will harm your dog**. Do not let any trainer make you do something that will hurt your dog or your relationship with your dog. If you constantly and firmly hold to this point in your search you will make the best choice possible to protect your dog and your relationship.

Training is NOT one size fits all. Find the approach and the trainer that fits you and your dog.

Three Training Approaches

1) Compulsion Training—a dominance model of correcting a dog into the desired behaviour.

The dog must obey, no matter what. The focus of this type of training is to stop unwanted behaviour symptoms by using any or all of the following: choke chains, prong collars, electric collars, ultra sound collars, and noise devices for corrections. **The dog must listen** and tools and corrections are introduced until the dog does listen.

The focus of this approach is on symptoms that are believed to occur because the owner is not being dominant...or not dominant enough. The dog must be submissive in every aspect of the relationship. Compulsion Training is a highly-corrective dominance model.

2) Compliance Training —similar to Compulsion Training, in that the dog needs to be submissive to your dominance, but specific techniques designed to create compliance are used.

With food and/or clickers, Compliance Training applies one or more methods of **negative or positive reinforcement** or **negative or positive punishment** to modify or shape behaviour. This approach is designed to help a dog make the desired changes in a way that is fair and supportive for the dog. If the dog is not complying while using food and/or clickers, then some elements of Compulsion Training may be brought into play. However, as soon as the dog does comply, the Compulsion elements are dropped.

In this approach, the person's actions are designed to have the dog comply or obey. Compliance Training equates this obedience with owner dominance over the dog.

3) Cooperative Teaching—a teaching model that focuses equally on the needs of the human and the dog to help them co-create a relationship, which excludes any expression of dominance.

Cooperative Teaching is the next step in the evolution of working with dogs. Generations of trainers and ordinary people have focused their efforts on domination and obedience, using punishment and/or reward as the foundation for the relationship. Neither of these work particularly well if your goal is an interactive relationship between human and dog.

By understanding that humans and dogs, both naturally and by human intervention, want to be in relationship with each other, Cooperative Teaching provides the structure and guidelines necessary to engage social being to social being in a calm, clear, and gentle way.

As 'the human' in a world (and therefore in relationships) designed by humans, you need to assume the responsibility to begin this process by focusing on **understanding why** a dog behaves in certain ways and **helping him/her build skills** to learn how to **work cooperatively** and choose to **co-create** with you, his/her human companion.

By engaging a dog's brain, emotions, and behaviour, Cooperative Teaching helps you translate what you already know about your dog and get beneath the layers to the root of any 'issues'. Each individual's personality and style of learning (both human and dog) are taken into consideration in helping you set healthy boundaries and 'relax' into them.

In this model, people and dogs are taught how to create an environment of safety, understanding, trust, and play...along with the cooperative intention to be self-controlled and mutually-supportive in co-creating a successful relationship.

Trainers

When looking for a trainer, it is a good idea to focus your search not only on the type of **training approaches** they use but also on the **type of trainer** who is using a particular approach. Trainers either teach the student or teach the technique. In my experience, these two approaches are mutually exclusive.

Trainers Who Focus on Techniques

Trainers who focus on techniques will most often have one main technique for teaching. This is their 'style' or approach. Some will also try other techniques but they will always default to their preferred 'style'. Therefore, any dog they're teaching must fit the particular technique they choose to use.

The technique will most often have been learned from a school, another trainer, a company they work for, or from a franchise of which they are part.

Trainers Who Focus on the Student

Trainers who focus on the student also have techniques they will use but their choices are made to suit the dog (and the person) with whom they are working. If the dog is not responding well to one technique, then they will shift to another.

Good trainers will talk to you about who your dog is and what s/he needs to learn in order to listen to you...and still express his/her own personality and needs. They will assess your dog and you must be able to understand and agree with this assessment in order for it to be of value to you and your dog. Remember, you know your dog and the assessment should reveal a recognizable description of him/her. If it doesn't, keep shopping.

Before you hire a trainer, my suggestion is that you discuss how s/he will be training—what technique(s) and tools s/he will use, what the dog must do to 'be trained' and what you must do to fulfill your end of the bargain. It is important for you to decide if you feel comfortable doing what s/he asks with the tools s/he will want to use.

Questions to Ask All Trainers:

- What is your view of the best kind of dog/human relationship?
- Describe your technique(s) and the tools and equipment you use.
- What do you do if the dog is not listening to you or working with you?

Remember, no trainer can tell you what to do with your dog. Only YOU can decide what will work for you.

And this brings us to the final points in selecting a trainer. **The following points are non-negotiable. If all of these points are not in place, stop what you are doing immediately.**

- **The trainer should ensure:**
YOU are happy and comfortable with the training methods and the training process.
Your DOG is happy and comfortable with the training.
- **You should be able to easily and clearly see** that your dog is comfortable and happy with the training. New learning can bring tension and discomfort but each step will be safe for the dog and you will see the dog enjoying and/or rising to the challenge as s/he tries to master the training.

- Reject any learning where your dog looks scared, fearful, and/or unhappy. Remember, you know your dog. Trust your instincts. Change the approach or change the trainer.

This brings us to the last non-negotiable point:

- **The training is working and helping YOU and your DOG.**
Your dog is smart and so are you. If you are not seeing even small changes that show a dog is starting to understand within two or three attempts of a particular strategy, then stop what you are doing and reassess to set up a new plan. If your trainer does not agree, stop the work, and look for a new trainer.

To avoid doing permanent harm to your dog, shop for a trainer and an approach that seems to work for both of you. Next, make sure the training is actually working. If not, stop training and change the approach or the trainer. Only you can protect your dog and your relationship with your dog.

My next article will be about answering the questions: **“Why do I have to dominate my dog? Is there a better way?”**