

New and Improved Dog Advice

by Carol Gannaway

Since I have been helping people with their dogs some of the advice I used to give is no longer valid. The information about our canine companions in the past was developed from the personal experiences of people who trained dogs. Scientists in the fields of animal behavior and biology provide the information available today.

One important and interesting change in thinking is about how dogs evolved from wolves into our trusting companions. The out dated thinking went something like this: A caveman found a wolf cub, brought it home and tamed it. The pup then became a hunting and guarding friend of the family. Consider that a wolf cub could not be tamed in one generation or even in many generations it would still be a wild animal this scenario seems ridiculous. As described in *Dogs*, by biologists Raymond and Lorna Coppinger a more realistic explanation is that wolves, being scavengers, started hanging out at the dump sites of villagers. There was little interaction between the scavengers and the humans. As generations of wolves acclimated to dump life it became apparent to some wolves [these would be the abnormal wolves] that staying closer to the human inhabitants was one way of getting at the scraps first and maybe even some shelter. There was still little physical interaction between wolf and human but the wolves were slowly becoming dependent on people for their food and the security of an area near the house. This mutualistic symbiotic relationship proved to be successful for wolves and humans alike and stayed in this manner for years. The rest is history, now dogs share our homes and enhance our lives. Thanks goodness for scavengers.

This next bit of information has also been found to be no longer true. It is the need to support the “alpha” or “dominant” dog in your home by petting, feeding and interacting with that dog first. This is advice I have given in the past and even included it in my book *Living with More than One Dog* published in the early 1990’s. I no longer give this advice today. What has been discovered is that the truly alpha dog would not need the support of the humans; he has it all on his own. A successful dog pack lives in harmony and there would be very little squabbling. The dog that is putting on the most display is generally a beta dog, not the alpha dog, acting like a hoodlum and gathering attention for him. Better canine management use of the tools available like leash, gates, crates and training from the human end will generally help bring about peace.

I believe that the humans of the family should be leaders but that should not be confused with being the alpha or the domination of your dog. Your dog is never going to think you are another dog and will never confused your actions with that of another alpha dog. Humans are good leaders for dogs in the way that any being is a good leader: they set clear guidelines that are rewarding, easy to understand and obey. That is how a human can be a good leader to dogs and it has nothing to do with dominance or being

alpha. Helping your dog to understand what is expected and able to achieve through training is what will set him apart from the untrained masses.

Another misunderstanding in dog training is the use of food as reward. I'm amazed at how controversial that still is today when it works so great. Humans are a very stingy group as a whole when it comes to training their dogs. Even before they start training, people often want to know when they can quit using rewards. I say I hope they never quit rewarding their dog. Why would you stop rewarding your faithful companion? Even though I am over fifty I still like a reward and I'll work pretty hard to get something I consider valuable. Since I have been going to college I discovered I'll work my heart out for a good grade and I also like a paycheck still.

This next example is another misconception about the use of food in training. In the level one group classes the dogs are untrained and learning a new language, the language of another species...humans. I think we have a hard time getting along with our own species but the expectation for the dog is that he should pick up the language and the behaviors of our species in a very short period of time. I encourage my human students to cut loose, be generous in their reward, especially for the first few weeks, and make it fun to be the student. I'm talking about a little bit of hot dog or cheese or maybe one of the healthy dog food treat available today. As the training progresses the humans often comment about their dog "Look at Max, he is only paying attention to me for the treat." It seems like a negative way to look at the scenario. To me it looks like "Max is paying attention to you, give him the treat." Success, isn't that what training and teaching is all about?

Another misconception is that all dogs will enjoy the company of all other dogs. That is an unrealistic expectation. If you asked a room of 1000 people how many of them liked every person they met, no one would raise their hand. But that is the human expectation for a dog. That is one of the reasons dog parks are so popular today. People are very surprised when things don't go as anticipated at the park. I'm surprised things go so well at dog parks. A group of prey driven animals interacting in a heightened state of excitement, it's a wonder more dogs aren't injured or killed. It says a lot about dog's ability to hold their inner drives in check.

I plan on continuing to learn more about dogs and their behavior and as I do I will make adjustments in my thinking and not get stuck on information that is outdated and no longer true. I hope you will do the same.