

When it comes to training, it's not about respect, it's about reward.

By Tracy Krulik

Eager to Please?

The first time my husband and I took Emma, our newly adopted Beagle, out for a walk, we knew we were in trouble. Emma was terrified. Her tail was perpetually tucked, the wrinkles on her brow screamed misery, her pupils were dilated and she wouldn't budge. We were completely in over our heads. So, as soon as we got home, we called in the cavalry.



“I feel more connected and bonded to my animal because he’s actually looking to me. He’s wanting to learn.”

A lovely positive-reinforcement dog trainer, Dolores Murray, came over the next morning armed with her weapon of choice: Stella and Chewy’s freeze-dried Dandy Lamb Dinner Patties.

Within an hour, Emma wasn’t just walking with us, she was scrambling-across-rocks-on-the-shore-of-the-Potomac-River-happy walking with us. Murray showered Emma with lamb. Car drove by? Lamb! Strangers approached? She gave them lamb to give to Emma. Twenty preschoolers holding hands skipped by? Lamb, lamb, LAMB!

To this day, food is the key to helping our fearful dog overcome obstacles. So I was shocked when friends, strangers and dog trainers alike questioned what the heck I was doing. “You’re spoiling her,” they’d say. “My dog sits because he wants to please us. You should make Emma respect you.” Or, “You’re bribing her.”

I discovered that this concept of dogs doing things to please their owners has

been around since before Elvis shook his hips. But is it valid? Are dogs born with a desire to please? And why, if thousands and thousands of animals—chickens and goats and sea lions and parrots and so on—have been professionally trained using food as motivation, is there such a stigma about using food to train dogs?

I went on a mission to find out.

It turns out that the definitive answer to whether dogs have an innate desire to please is... we don’t know.

There’s no scientific research to prove it either way. Dog cognition is a

growing area of study today, so down the road, we might have a better sense of what exactly is going on inside our dogs’ cute noggins. As of now, we don’t have any real idea.

“I would accept the fact that because of the close relationship that dogs have had with humans for so long, they may be do have this predisposition to want to please,” says Marc Bekoff, author and professor emeritus of ecology and evolutionary biology at the University of Colorado, Boulder. “But then when you consider that around 75 percent of all dogs on the planet are feral... I’ve met lots of feral dogs who don’t really care about me. They want to avoid me, more than anything,” he says.

There is some evidence, though, that we may not understand our dogs as well as we think we do—that, just as they do with other humans, people have a tendency to ascribe motives to dogs that aren’t necessarily there.

“[People] project all sorts of things on all sorts of social relationships, ranging from dogs to other humans,” Bekoff says. “You go to dog parks and [you’ll hear] dogs characterized in one way: playful, standoffish, maybe a little aggressive. It’s incredible how different people watch the same dog and have a completely different personality profile for the dog.”

Alexandra Horowitz, professor of psychology and canine cognition at Barnard College, Columbia University, led a study in 2009 to test this. She wanted to see if people who claimed their dogs were showing that well-known “guilty look” when they came home to a torn-up couch or a pile of



“I’m sorry, he’s not here right now, but I could get one of his socks for you...”



poo on the antique rug were actually reading the dog correctly.

In the experiment, participants told their dogs not to eat a food treat the pup wanted, and then left the room. When they returned, the researchers would tell the owner whether or not the dog ate the treat. However, the researchers were not always truthful. In some cases, the dog would leave the treat alone but the owner would be told that he ate it, or vice versa. Thus, sometimes dogs who did what they were told were scolded and others who disobeyed by eating the treat were not.

It turns out that the behavior dog owners were sure represented guilt—some combination of avoiding eye contact, rolling over, tail tucking, tongue flicking, pressing their ears back and/or skulking away—was tied to the owner’s tone of voice and demeanor. The look, therefore, more likely represented the dog’s anticipation of punishment or attempting to evade it than feeling guilt.

“Importantly, this misattribution could be harmful to dogs if their owners have expectations that the dogs do understand rules, correct behavior and so forth, and believe that dogs either willfully or neglectfully violate these rules,” Horowitz and Julie Hecht wrote in a chapter they co-authored for the book *Domestic Dog Cognition and Behavior: The Scientific Study of Canis familiaris*.

Jean Donaldson, founder of the

Academy for Dog Trainers, has been the voice of opposition to the “desire to please” notion for more than two decades for just this reason.

“Trainers who make claims about dogs working ‘to please’ or strictly for praise,” she wrote in her book *Culture Clash*, “seem oblivious to the main motivator they employ: pain.” Rather

than being given food or toys or something else they really love to reinforce good behavior, dogs are punished for bad behavior.

“We expect dogs to do things without reward, that they should know that sitting is what I want them to do, or they should know this or that,” says Jill Sackman, veterinary behaviorist and member of the American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior. “I don’t think we [reward] enough with human beings either. We live in a culture where it’s like, ‘I’m gonna point out your negative’ instead of capture you doing something really great and continuing to reward that.”

Twenty years after the first publication of *Culture Clash*, there is still evidence of trainers using pain to punish dogs for being “disobedient” rather than teaching them what to do and reinforcing that behavior.

Nicky Wilke turned to trainers last year for help with her 90-pound Husky

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mix, Charlie, who would pull her to the ground when he darted after another dog. Wilke was horrified by the methods they recommended. She was expressly told by multiple trainers not to use food because Charlie would only behave for the “bribe” and not because he respected her. “Everyone was telling me I had to be more firm with Charlie,” Wilke says.

And by “be more firm,” they meant that she should use some incredibly cruel techniques to punish Charlie when he didn’t do what they wanted: Shock him with electricity from a collar around his neck. Wrap his leash around his belly near his genital area so that it would rub when he pulled. Squeeze a pressure point right above his back leg if he reacted to another dog.

“If we say something really clear like ‘come’ or ‘sit,’ and on occasion we witness the dog not doing it, it’s almost impossible for people to interpret anything other than, ‘He knows what to do,

I’ve seen him do it, and now that he’s not doing it, it’s because of some sort of power struggle,’” Donaldson says in a phone interview. “And as soon as you get into ‘power struggle,’ then we’re down the rabbit hole.”

But Charlie is one of the lucky ones. Wilke persevered, and six months ago, she found Renée Erdman, a positive-reinforcement trainer and graduate of the Academy for Dog Trainers. Erdman has helped Wilke teach Charlie how to walk politely on leash and how to behave around other dogs.

“She saved our lives,” Wilke says. “I used to have anxiety taking Charlie out for a walk. I went from not being able to walk past a dog to introducing Charlie to dog parks and playing with seven dogs at the same time.”

Erdman used food to do it.

“Once I started getting into different treats—really tasty treats—it was like, okay, now he’s paying attention to me. Now he’s interested in playing the

games and learning,” Wilke says. “It was an amazing feeling to finally have control of the situation, and I feel more connected and bonded to my animal because he’s actually looking to me. He’s wanting to learn.”

I continue to be questioned—and even, at times, judged—by friends and neighbors for feeding diced chicken to Emma when she’s scared or using it to lavishly reward her for not eating that dog poop when I say “leave it.”

They don’t get that Emma is not working me for food. She doesn’t love me any less because she knows she’ll get a jackpot of chicken when she runs to my side. In fact, it’s quite the opposite. I still have wonderful memories of splitting a hot-fudge sundae with my dad when I got straight As in school. To me, it’s the same thing.

“I think that to play that dichotomy of food versus true love is ridiculous,” Bekoff says. “It’s just not supported by any research at all.” **B**

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