

APDT POSITION STATEMENT DOG IMPOSSIBLE RESPONSE

The National Geographic TV show “Dog: Impossible” has rightfully elicited criticism about its main character and the lack of a scientific basis for the methods used in the show. The Association of Professional Dog Trainers (APDT) would like to take this opportunity to highlight critical facts about dog training and methodology, and the importance of the dog’s welfare during training.

The APDT is unwavering in its support of science-based methods of training and behavior modification, as well as the requirement that the animal’s welfare be paramount during training sessions. The APDT adheres to the concept of LIMA—“Least Intrusive, Minimally Aversive”—which requires trainers to use the most humane and effective tactics to achieve behavior change. For more information on this topic, please consult our LIMA Position Statement.

Science dictates that dogs learn through operant conditioning and classical conditioning.ⁱ Training “methods” that claim the dog learns by your energy or by your feeling the dog’s energy are simply not based on science. Similarly, training that suggests that you take on the role of a “leader” harkens back to dominance-based theories that have been disproven by research.ⁱⁱ For more information about the myths of dominance and “pack theory,” see our Position Statement on Dominance and Dog Training and the American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior (AVSAB) Dominance Position Statement.

A red flag with programs such as “Dog: Impossible” is the disclaimer “Don’t Try This At Home.” Placing animals in situations that are meant to elicit problematic behavior so that the behavior can be “corrected” or “resolved” does not set the animals up for success, and places the animals at serious risk of injury. What’s more, research has shown that exposing an animal to something the animal fears without allowing the animal to move away if uncomfortable (a procedure known as “flooding”) has the potential to make the animal even more fearful or aggressive in the future.ⁱⁱⁱ

Ultimately, these types of shows do not give a realistic view of proper training. They fail to address the need to craft a science-based training plan and implement that training plan in the most humane and effective way. Behavior research in the field of animals, and dog training in particular, has greatly expanded in recent years, and our understanding of behavior continues to grow thanks to continuing scientific studies. Shows of this kind do not reflect the results of that research.

Progressive training and behavior professionals keep up-to-date on the progress in research and science in order to provide the most effective and humane services possible to their clients and the animals in their care. APDT recommends that you choose a trainer who stays current with developments in the field of animal behavior, and who understands and uses operant

conditioning and positive reinforcement, classical conditioning, desensitization, and counter conditioning methods to modify behavior.

Adopted: October 28, 2019

ⁱ See: (1) M.R., Bailey J.S. 1999. *How Dogs Learn*. New York, NY: Howell Book House; (2) Yin S. 2004. *How to Behave So Your Dog Behaves*. Neptune City, NJ: TFH Publications; (3) Chance, P. *Learning and Behavior*. Australia: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, Ch. 3 (on classical conditioning), Ch. 5 (on reinforcement), Ch. 8 (on punishment).

ⁱⁱ See AVSAB Dominance Position Statement, citing: (1) Benowitz, E.A. 2001. *CliffsQuickReview: Principles of Management*. New York: Hungry Minds (scholars in human-related fields of business management and sociology, where leadership is studied extensively, recommend against use of coercion and force to gain leadership); (2) Yin, S. 2007. Dominance Versus Leadership in Dog Training. *Compendium Continuing Education for the Practicing Veterinarian*, 29:414-432 (leadership is established when an owner consistently sets limits and effectively communicates the rules by immediately rewarding desired behaviors and preventing or removing rewards for undesired behaviors before those behaviors are reinforced or practiced); (3) Yin, S. 2009. Dominance vs. Unruly Behavior. *In Low Stress Handling, Restraint and Behavior Modification of Dogs and Cats*. 52-73. Davis, Calif.: CattleDog Publishing (emphasizing the ability to influence dogs to perform behaviors willingly, which is one accepted definition of “leadership”). See also website for Dave Mech, at <https://davemech.org/wolf-news-and-information/>.

ⁱⁱⁱ See: (1) Overall K. *Manual of Clinical Behavioral Medicine for Dogs and Cats*. 1 Pap/DVD edition (July 9, 2013); (2) Leitenberg, H. 1990. *Handbook of Social and Evaluation Anxiety*. Springer. pp. 300-2. ISBN 978-0-306-43438-9. (3) *Implosive Therapy*. Donald J. Levis. Binghamton University, New York.