

Thoughts on an All-Positive Training Seminar

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Last weekend in an effort to extend my education, I attended a seminar given by Sarah Kalnajs, certified dog behavior consultant and certified pet dog trainer from Blue Dog Training and Behavior in Madison, WI. The seminar was called "Canine Body Language: A Visual Encyclopedia." It was my first such continuing education endeavor that wasn't from someone who takes a balanced training approach. Kalnajs defined her approach as "least invasive, minimally aversive" (LIMA), which is also what most balanced trainers, including myself, consider their approaches to be. However, she was quick to point out that in her approach there is no room for "shock" collars, prong collars, or "choke chains." There was an audible sigh of relief at this disclaimer from the room of rescue volunteers, vet techs, and other all-positive trainers.

My main motivation for attending the seminar was to further my own understanding of canine body language—to be able to "read" a dog better. And I actually think she was fairly successful at conveying that information. She came armed with a lot of video clips in a power point presentation, which is the next best thing to a real, live dog (she had two of her own there for awhile, but they didn't really serve a purpose in the seminar; they seemed primarily to be there as companionship for her and to legitimize her as a dog professional.).

My internal conflict started when she brought up the topic of training method. She seemed to be encouraging being open-minded to other trainers that do things differently, a promising sign, I naively thought. It quickly became apparent that the reason she was encouraging this open attitude and discouraging attacks and judgment of those "other" trainers on the "other side" was so they would be more receptive to being educated about dog-friendly training methods, to learn to train and handle dogs the "right" way, and she clearly understood that those "other" trainers wouldn't feel so receptive if they were on the defensive. At that point, she said, "I don't know what method or approach you all practice, but I commonly find that I'm preaching to the choir at these seminars." Meaning she usually has friendly audiences who are on the positive-only bandwagon. At which point my hand shot up. I felt I had to make my presence known; I was curious as to whether or not she really MEANT what she said about being open-minded towards "others" or if it was all a lot of talk, and I was ready to find out.

So I proceeded to "out" myself to the room, which felt oddly like I might expect it to feel to introduce oneself at an AA meeting—there was clapping and everything (Seriously. She actually invited the audience to "positively reinforce" me for attending the seminar by clapping for me, which, in case you're wondering definitely felt patronizing and what I would assume it feels like to be patted on the head and fed a cookie for doing my "business" in the yard instead of on the rug.). After I outed myself and the applause died down, I had the floor for a few seconds, so I asked that everyone else in attendance take her advice about being open-minded about others' approaches, and follow my lead to attend a seminar given by a someone with a different training outlook than they held, possibly an e-collar trainer.

And maybe a few of them will, but I doubt you'll see Kalnajs at an e-collar seminar any time soon. It's politically correct to tell people to be open-minded, but it's a whole different thing to actually BE open-

mindful and walk the walk when no one's holding you accountable. Plus, she said something that I thought was very revealing about her true motivation for being an all-positive trainer. She confirmed something I've long-suspected about many all-positive trainers and she said it in her own words, which I'll paraphrase here because recording devices were not allowed. She said, "I'm afraid of the "fallout" of positive punishment (correction). I'm afraid that I will do irreparable damage to a dog if I positively punish it and that's not a risk I'm willing to take. The worst damage I can do with a cookie is create a dog that won't do a command unless I have a cookie, and I am comfortable with that." Again, audible sigh of relief from the audience. Two vital pieces of information revealed in that statement:

- First and most importantly, she believes that there couldn't be any significant fallout from training a dog to work for a treat. She and I differ philosophically on this point. I believe you run the risk of creating a food-obsessed (read: resource guarding) dog if you train exclusively with treats. Additionally, I think the consequences of a dog trained to always expect and respond to a food reward could experience problems in the real world, where other tempting distractions will vie for their attention, and experiences with clients bear out this hunch. I believe the fallout in this situation might be a dead dog and that is something I am NOT comfortable with.
- The second piece of information she betrays is that she is not actually particularly confident in her ability to read a dog accurately and/or willing to make necessary adjustments in her handling as a result. She's afraid of doing "irreparable damage" (and she definitely used those words in her original statement). Any decent balanced trainer is constantly reading a dog they're working with and making necessary adjustments to keep the training BALANCED, meaning you never get to a point of "irreparable damage" because at the first sign that the correction is too high, you incorporate more motivation, or you back off the correction a little, or you switch up the training and work on something easier for awhile, constantly adjusting to the dog and the situation so you never get an anxiety-ridden dog. In the context of the discussion, fallout refers to an anxious, stressed, or aggressive response. And yet, here she was teaching a seminar on dog body language.
- The third thing I'll mention, because it followed sequentially in the order of events, is that she volunteered that she'd never used an e-collar and didn't know how to train with one. This after denouncing "shock" collars multiple times throughout the morning session, directly disparaging the tool and also using it in such off-handed comments as, "You better stop yawning or I'll strap a shock collar on you and start shocking you!" (nudge, nudge, wink, wink). Open minded, eh?

Her main premise in the afternoon session was that using any sort of correction (she routinely referred to it as positive punishment) created unnecessary stress and frustration in a dog which inhibited learning. She illustrates this point by playing something called the "training game" which is apparently prevalent in all-positive circles (nudge, nudge, wink, wink) as many people practically squealed with delight when she mentioned we were going to play it. But first, she wanted to play a different version of this game. For this different version, she would use both positive punishment (a harsh sounding verbal "no!") and positive reinforcement (a verbal "Yes!") to "shape" a behavior in a person. The subject stepped out of the room and it was decided that the behavior would be she had to walk 360 degrees around a certain chair and sit down in the chair. Now, I wish I could draw you a diagram because this bordered on ridiculous. The way the chair was positioned, there was barely room to squeeze around it between two other tables. It wasn't as if the scenario was set up to be conducive to eliciting this behavior. The person proceeded to enter the room and she immediately began barking "No!" at her. At one point she called the woman a "stupid idiot," and I believe feigned a

kick in her general direction (suggesting physical abuse) and clearly breaking the most important balanced training rule, never correct out of anger or with emotion. The woman never did perform the behavior and the demonstration was stopped after 3 minutes. Kalnajs asked the woman if she felt frustrated, intimidated, scared, anxious? Yes, the woman agreed, all of the above. It was a truly harrowing experience.

Now she set up "the training game" the traditional way, which is to say it was time to demonstrate how effective positive-only training is. A different woman (potentially a smarter one? We'll never know.), exited the room and it was decided that the behavior being "shaped" would be to close the lid of the laptop on the front table. Now to be clear, the laptop was sitting open on the front table—there were no obstacles impeding this woman's progress. She wasn't supposed to circle the table one time prior to closing the lid, simply go up to the laptop and shut it. Using only "yes" when the woman moved in the right direction, the woman was able to accomplish the behavior in 50 seconds and voila, a realistic, real-world, accurate rendition of dog training was facilitated.

As you can imagine, I again raised my hand. "What about `help'?" I asked. Every trainer I know helps a dog be successful when first introducing a concept—it's called "setting the dog up for success." "What do you mean?" she asked. She actually asked me what I meant by "help."

I said, "You know, like using the leash to guide the dog into position to help them make the correct association." She said she doesn't believe in helping a dog learn a behavior—she'd rather "shape" the behavior. At first I was very confused because the second commandment of balanced dog training is to provide help to a confused dog so they are ultimately successful. Once I framed her response in the all-positive context, I think I understood. In her mind "help" equated solely to using a food lure, and that was something she was absolutely opposed to. She cut a clear distinction between rewarding with a treat and using food to lure a dog into a position. She said she'd use a lure one to three times when first teaching a behavior, but after that never again, only as a reward. Harsh. At this point it became clear to me that any efforts to point out how unrealistic the "training game" was would be a losing battle, but it pained me to see all these well-intentioned individuals seemingly eating up what she was serving, nodding, and not questioning it.

LIMA

I think all trainers strive for this in their training and no one person or approach has a lock on "least invasive, minimally aversive" or some variation on that theme. For corrections, we give a correction at the lowest intensity that's effective, meaning it interrupts the unwanted behavior. It does take knowing the dog and situation to know what an effective level is at any given time. In e-collar training, we strive to use a level that is mildly convincing yet not startling or painful for the obvious reasons that if a dog is scared or in pain, anxious or stressed, he will be unable to learn. This is a point on which all trainers seem to agree. However, we can't seem to agree on what constitutes too much stress or too intense an aversive, or on what constitutes a "trained" dog for that matter.

The inherent problem with claiming to use LIMA as a training approach or philosophy is that it's not clear what this means for any one particular dog at any particular point in time. The least invasive, minimally aversive handling practice to effectively elicit a response in a training room with no distractions may be different than on a busy sidewalk in the real world. Using the same handling techniques on the sidewalk as you used in the classroom may result in a dismal or even dangerously unreliable response.

The main difference between all-positive trainers and balanced trainers where LIMA is concerned appears to be that balanced trainers acknowledge that "least invasive, minimally aversive" is a moving target--always changing given the environment and the dog and the day, and we provide the owner/handler with all the necessary knowledge, technique, and tools to enable the dog to be reliably competent and safe in a variety of situations, including off-leash and around real-world distractions. Simply withholding a treat may be an effective "aversive" in the training room, able to convince a dog that he wants to comply. But a leash correction or a stim from an e-collar may be necessary in the real world to get a dog's attention off a rabbit. When you're talking about LIMA, you have to consider the individual dog you're working with up to and including his biggest, most tempting distractions and understand what constitutes the least invasive, minimally aversive handling technique to effectively elicit the desired response in THAT situation. Kalnajs did not address the issue of distractions or off-leash reliability at any point in her discussion about training approach in her Saturday seminar.

Behaviorists versus Trainers

When Kalnajs queried the seminar audience, asking if any of us were trainers that also did "behavior modification," I was very confused since as a trainer, I'm always called upon to modify behavior, and teaching a common language between dog and owner via obedience commands is an integral part of this process. Kalnajs seemed to differentiate between "trainers" and "behaviorists" and considers herself primarily to be the latter. She seemed to define a dog trainer as a person that teaches obedience commands absent of contextualizing the commands in a way that actually modifies dog behavior. I was certainly confused until I again made the effort to frame what she was saying in an all-positive training context.

A truly balanced training approach cannot help but teach the basic principles of self-control, responsiveness, and focus along with any commands that are being taught. The commands are simply the vehicle by which we teach a dog these basic principles but the basic principles are the real payoff at the end of the day. The basic principles are what helps an anxious dog exercise discipline and begin to get her anxiety under control, or a reactive dog remain focused on his owner instead of pitching a fit when another dog walks by. A "sit" is only as good as a dog's ability and desire to hold the command. What you're really after is the self-control and discipline that is learned when a dog learns to sit and hold the position until released, all the while keeping their eyes trained on you, eagerly awaiting the next instruction. That self-control and focus has hundreds of applications on a daily basis for a dog.

However, in a world that embraces dog "behaviorists," and where the obedience training standard forgives dogs for disregarding a command in the absence of a treat, it would seem that the same basic principles of self-control, focus, and responsiveness aren't being conveyed. Rather, a dog really is learning "sit" just for the sake of learning sit. If "sit" isn't really expected to be performed without a treat (as stated by Kalnajs herself) or in the face of a distraction, what good is it really? Clearly, actual serious behavior modification (relieving stress, anxiety, aggression) is done by behaviorists and obedience training (sit, come, stay) is done by dog trainers and these are very different professions when it comes to all-positive training.

Finally, what this seminar really served to do for me was provide an inside glimpse at what's going on in the all-positive training community, and validate my decision to stay as far removed from that as I can and train in a balanced manner, including continuing to utilize e-collars. I drove home feeling so grateful that I had an effective and satisfying way to bring real results to people with real dog behavior problems (anxiety, reactivity, stress, hyperactivity), not to mention your average everyday obedience training. I actually felt bad for many of the other people in the room that didn't have a way to filter the

information they were receiving through a balanced context as I'd been forced to filter the information through an all-positive lens to make any sort of sense out of it.

It made me feel like we really did come from very different worlds! In their world, behavior modification was so overly complicated that a trainer couldn't possibly do it. But I suppose if you handicap yourself—that is to say you remove a whole category of feedback: the ability to give any correction/interruption/positive punishment (call it what you will), you really have made it more difficult for yourself to attain results. So maybe it's a relief for an all-positive trainer to be able to say to someone, "Well, separation anxiety isn't really what I fix. I teach dogs how to sit for cookies. To address that serious BEHAVIOR PROBLEM, you're going to have to seek the help of someone much more qualified and educated than myself, a Certified Behavior Consultant."

And the "Behavior Consultants" have these all-positive trainers eating out of their hands—what a racket they're running! First convincing these well-meaning folks that it's inappropriate to ever say "no" to a dog, and then when the all positive trainer can't figure out how to fix the problem without correcting the dog, they send the dog off to the Certified Behavior Consultant! I prefer to have all the knowledge and tools available to me in order to actually help that person that comes to me with a dog behavior problem. That's where I get the most satisfaction out of what I do—solving the behavior problems, having someone tell me I was their last stop before they were going to get rid of the dog, or seeing the relief in someone's face when I tell them I can help them with their problem after they've been told by other trainers that they would have to give up their dog because the problem couldn't be fixed.