

Training Your Dog The Right Way
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The death of a young child from a ‘rebirthing’ technique brings up several important issues regarding behavior modification in both people and animals. In the field of dog training, there are also techniques that have resulted in death. Puppies have been killed from the technique of shoving fingers down their throats to discourage nipping, biting and chewing. Adult dogs have suffered collapsed tracheas and blindness resulting from inappropriately harsh use of choke chains. Proponents of these procedures claim that when used properly they are harmless and sometimes are the only way to cure a particular problem. Similarly statements have been made about the rebirthing technique. Although people who are intervening to change behavior never ever set out to do harm, it must be recognized that some intervention and training techniques have a high risk for harm, serious injury and even death.

To protect people and animals from harm, it would be helpful to be able to prove that potentially dangerous techniques have a high probability of being successful, so that people can make intelligent decisions as to whether the benefits might be worth the risk. Unfortunately, in both human and animal psychology the success of a technique is difficult to prove. For example, the behavior might have improved even if the intervention hadn’t taken place, or the behavior might have changed for some other reason. Because not all behavior modification techniques are well grounded in scientific theory, it is important that consumers do their homework and make inquiries not only about the technique itself but the experience and qualifications of the individuals implementing it.

To further protect people and animals from harm, it would be helpful to have clear, effective and enforceable guidelines for the use of procedures that are potentially dangerous. One such guideline might be that the least aversive technique that is expected to be effective should be used first. For example, if a dog can be taught to come when called by using a powerful food reward, then it would be inappropriate to use a shock collar as the first choice. Perhaps some techniques are potentially so dangerous that they should be banned, as what occurred with the rebirthing technique. There are no similar bans on dog training techniques, and in fact in a few states (not Colorado), harm that occurs as a result of training is specifically exempted from prosecution under cruelty to animals statutes.

Dog owners should always have the final say over what techniques are used to train their dogs. If someone is doing something that the owners do not approve of, or believe is not in their dog’s best interest, he or she should refuse to implement the technique and not allow anyone else to either. Owners should not be bullied or shamed into using an aversive technique by claims it is the ‘only way’ to change a behavior. Other options are always available.