

Defining Humane Dog Training
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In Virginia, a puppy was choked to death by a dog trainer using a prong collar and his fingers in the puppy's throat. The reason? The trainer was disciplining the puppy for biting at the other puppies in class.

In Illinois a few years ago, a dog was blinded in class due to lack of oxygen to the brain. How? She was lifted off the ground and swung around by a leash and choke chain for supposedly growling at the trainer.

In some obedience classes in Colorado, dogs are hung, hit, and have objects thrown at them, all in the name of training. Unfortunately, these and other acts of cruelty are not uncommon occurrences in obedience classes across the country.

Historically, the methods used to train dogs, and horses, have relied on physical force. In fact, a profile of a well-known trainer of field dogs, credits the trainer with developing "applications of electricity" (i.e. shock collars) which "made it possible for people who lacked the physical strength required to dominate these dogs" to still be able to train them.

In March 1998 the American Humane Association began to address the problems in the dog training field by convening a task force comprised of leading dog trainers, applied animal behaviorists and veterinary behaviorists at its headquarters in Englewood, Colorado.

The task force discussed a number of issues surrounding humane dog training. What is humane dog training? What kind of professional training would a humane trainer receive? How would a dog owner identify a humane trainer?

The task force is developing a position statement on humane training, a list of unacceptable training techniques, a professional curriculum to train trainers, a code of practice for humane dog trainers and plans to educate the general public about what to look for in a trainer. AHA will next seek to enlist the support of other national organizations with interests in humane dog training to assist them in moving these plans forward. The ultimate goal is to minimize the use of aversives and eliminate abuse in dog training by educating trainers and the public.

Most people don't like doing unpleasant things to their dogs to train them. While every dog must be taught house manners and be under the control of its owner, it is not acceptable to injure them or abuse them in the name of training. Training should be fun for both dog and owner.

*Since this article appeared, two publications have come out of this initial project.

1. Professional Standards for Dog Trainers: Effective, Humane Principles. Published by and available from the Delta Society, www.deltasociety.org
2. Guide to Humane Dog Training. Published by and available from American Humane Association, www.americanhumane.org