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Hi Trudi,

My husband and I have a 9 month old German Shepherd called Kaine. This is our 4th German Shepherd so we know the breed well and have trained all of our dogs in the past at various traditional dog training clubs once they were 5 or 6 months old. With Kaine, we actually started his training earlier and attended a Puppy Pre-School that was run by a Delta Instructor. The methods that were taught were all positive and we were introduced to positive reinforcement techniques. This method of training was completely different to the more traditional methods of training that we have used in the past and whilst I thoroughly enjoyed it (as did Kaine), my husband wasn't convinced. He feels that using food to train a dog is no more than a bribe. He thinks that the methods are too soft and that a dog needs strict discipline in order to understand and respect us as the pack leaders. My husband says that I will encourage Kaine to become dominant if I continue to train this way but I have actually seen great progress in his training as I have continued to use positive reinforcement. I am now very confused as to which method of training would be better for him in the long run – traditional training or positive reinforcement.

I would appreciate your thoughts.

Thanks,  
 Jacquie Walker

Hi Jacquie,

I am a positive reinforcement trainer, BUT I come from a traditional training background (check or choker chains, aversive methods etc), so I am fully aware of the mind-set that is associated with traditional training techniques. Methods of dog training have evolved over the years as we have come to better understand how dogs learn, act and behave. Dogs are opportunists (just like us) so if a behaviour works for them, they are more inclined to repeat the behaviour, whereas if a behaviour doesn't work for them it will diminish over time. Therefore, positively reinforcing a behaviour that you want or like actively encourages the dog to repeat those behaviours. Reprimanding a behaviour only teaches the dog what you don't want it to do, not what you DO want it to do. Positive reinforcement doesn't always mean using food either, it is about finding your dog's main, high value motivator and using it to get the desired behaviours that you want, for instance my Sheltie is absolutely ball focused – give him the choice between roast chicken and a ball, he'll choose the ball EVERY TIME – so I use the ball to motivate him into delivering the desired behaviours that I want and like. Positive reinforcement is not bribing your dog – it's simply using the high value item (food, toy, ball, whatever) that motivates your dog to train the desired behaviour and then, importantly, once the behaviour is established you need to slowly fade out the motivator so that ultimately Kaine is delivering the behaviour you want without food. Often we use the motivator as a crutch and fall back on it if the dog is not performing. This simply means that the behaviour is not solidly established, so go back to using the motivator and fade more slowly.

Also, dogs that are trained using aversive methods are less inclined to try new things because they anticipate the correction or reprimand if they are wrong. This means they can also become more difficult to train as they get older as they resist anything that is new or different.

Motivating Kaine into doing what you want him to do is a much more quick and effective way of training than forcing him and it also encourages him to problem-solve, offer behaviours and try new things. It will NOT encourage him to become "dominant". Dominance is just a popular word that is commonly used to describe just about any dog behaviour that is undesirable to the owner and does not correctly reflect the true definition of the word. It is however, important that Kaine sees you as the leaders and that he does what you ask of him, and this can easily be achieved by motivating him to do the things you want, and not asking him to do something that you know he hasn't yet been trained to do.

You say you have seen great progress in Kaine's training whilst using positive reinforcement – I think that speaks louder than words as to which method of training you should pursue!

Trudi

**Trudi Thorpe** runs a dog behaviour and training company, dogLOGIC, based in Sydney. As Trudi says, "DOGS, DOGS, DOGS... A childhood obsession that I never grew out of." She devises and implements individual behavioural strategies and obedience techniques based on 20 years of studying dog problems and problem dogs.

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Ask Trudi a question regarding behaviour by emailing [behaviour@urbananimal.net](mailto:behaviour@urbananimal.net)



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