

Nicole Wilde, owner of the Gentle Guidance dog training center, operates her business with the belief that using positive reinforcement rather than punishment when training canines yields more successful results.



GENTLE TOUCH

By Sharon Cotal
Staff Writer

Nicole Wilde has had dogs in her life since she was old enough to walk, she's always loved them, and she even trained her own dogs when she was a kid.

But when Wilde took her dogs to various obedience courses, she didn't really like the punishment-based methods used by most dog trainers, so she came up with her own positive methods and opened Gentle Guidance dog training.

With Wilde's reward-based method, dogs are shown from the beginning what is expected of them, then are rewarded with food treats, praise or petting when they comply.

"I set the dogs up to succeed, and then I reward them for doing it," Wilde said. "Dogs that come to my training classes have their tails wagging — they're happy to be there."

While punishment-based methods such as choke chains and modeling appear to get results immediately because the dog is afraid not to comply, the fear, stress and frustration they cause often resurfaces as aggression or other seemingly unrelated behavior problems later on, Wilde said.

One of the methods Wilde uses is clicker training. She uses a "clicker" to let the dogs know when they are doing an action correctly, and every click earns the dogs a treat. Food treats are used initially, then are phased out and replaced with praise, petting, a quick game with a toy or a quick toss of a ball.

"It's a whole lot more pleasant for the dog, and it's a wonderful way to teach tricks," Wilde said.

Wilde should know. She has worked with all types of

canines, including wolves and wolf hybrids, in both training and rescue for many years.

She worked in a rescue shelter, a veterinarian's office, has done doggie day care, was the editor of *Get a Pet* magazine and wrote a book titled "Living With Wolfdogs."

"I've been training dogs for 20 years and I'm still learning new things," Wilde said. "I go to seminars given by some of the world's top trainers, because there's always something new to learn."

Wilde is encouraged by the fact that many trainers who have used punishment-based methods are realizing that rewards work and are switching to more positive methods of training.

She recommends that people looking for a trainer for their dog ask a lot of questions and visit a class before deciding whether to hire someone.

"Some people will say that they use positive methods because they say 'Good boy' occasionally, but they might still use choke chains," Wilde said. "You have to visit the class to really get an idea of what goes on."

Wilde trains new puppies as well as older dogs who have developed behavior problems. She teaches people to read their pet's body language, and is sometimes called a "dog whisperer" by clients who are amazed at her ability to calm animals that are stressed.

"I think a lot of it is body language," she said. "The more people learn about how to read their dogs, the better they can communicate with them."

For more information about Gentle Guidance, call Wilde at (661) 299-5704.