

## LIFESTYLE

# Aftermath of the San Francisco Case: Canine Training and Behavior

There are very few dog owners who didn't have a strong emotional reaction to the recent dog mauling case that cost Diane Whipple her life. Many of us consider our dogs to be our children, or at the least, a cherished family member. The concept of dogs being used as weapons, or suddenly going berserk and attacking, is horrifying. But just as frightening is the reality that any dog who is trained with harsh methods could end up "turning" on a person just as easily as Bane and Hera did, even if the resulting injuries are not as severe.

Most people view dog training as basic obedience, which is usually learned in a group class. Then there are behavior issues ranging from mild, such as jumping up, to severe, such as aggression toward other dogs or people. These are usually addressed one-on-one. What is not common knowledge is there is a great range of training philosophies and techniques. Depending on which methods a trainer uses, the results can include life-changing effects on your dog's emotional and psychological state—and therefore, its behavior—for better or worse.

One long-standing technique still used by many trainers is the "alpha roll." The dog is forced onto its back. The person then growls at it, stares at it (a threat in the animal kingdom), or just waits for the dog to stop struggling and

submit. The dog's submission is key. The technique is meant to establish who is boss, and is supposedly based on the way wolves in the wild correct each other. Guess what? They don't! Studies by early ethologists who believed wolves alpha-rolled each other were later disproved. What wolves really do is muzzle-pin each other, which means taking ones' jaws and placing them gently over the muzzle of the offender. The offending wolf then voluntarily submits. That's an important distinction. All a human is doing when alpha rolling a dog is teaching that dog physical strength is the way to get what you want. And is that really what we want to teach a pup who will grow up to be a sturdy, confident 90 pound Rottweiler? Remember this: Aggression begets aggression.

Punishment appears to work immediately, but what it really does is temporarily suppress behavior. Let's say I have an annoying habit of humming under my breath. If you put a gun to my head and asked me to stop, I would stop immediately. But your action would have caused me a lot of stress and frustration, which would inevitably resurface in other ways. It's the same with your dog. There is fallout from punishment, even if you don't see it at first. And, suppressing a behavior doesn't solve the underlying problem. Was I humming under my breath because something in

**Nicole  
Wilde**



*Going to the Dogs*

the environment stressed me out? If you force me to stop humming, I'm still afraid of that thing in the environment. Maybe now I'll lash out at the person next to me because I'm even more nervous! There's a lot more to dealing with canine behavior issues than punishing and suppressing behavior.

I see a lot of aggression cases. Some are dog-to-dog aggression, but most are dogs who have bitten people. The bites range from mild (more of a nip, perhaps with slight bruising) to severe, i.e. inflicting multiple puncture wounds on multiple people. The fact is, dogs do not go from being loving, docile family members one day to violently attacking the next (unless something is medically awry.) Dogs who bite severely have had a lot of practice leading up to it. They get more confident over time. That's why behavior issues should be treated at the first signs, and without force. I have been called in many times to work with dogs who have previously seen a trainer who used shock collars to "cure" the aggression. In every one of those cases, the "shock

treatment" had immediately suppressed the behavior, making it look like the problem was solved—then the behavior returned, or a worse one presented itself, resulting in even more damage to undo. Fortunately, the vast majority of those dogs could still be helped. The scary part is the potential damage those dogs could have inflicted, and sometimes did, in the meantime.

Now for the good news. If your dog has a sound temperament to begin with, and you use gentle, positive training methods, your dog has no reason to ever show signs of aggression. I have worked with a few dog owners recently who were worried, because of the recent dog mauling case, that their own sweet, wonderful dog might suddenly "turn on them." I have even heard of cases where people gave up their dogs based on that fear. Please, don't make hasty judgments. Even dogs who are showing the first signs of aggression can be helped with positive methods. Using truly positive training techniques, and methods based on psychology, rather than force, is the way to ensure a happy, healthy, loving relationship with your dog for years to come.

*Nicole Wilde runs Gentle Guidance Dog Training, offering in-home behavior modification and obedience training. For information call 299-5704 or visit [www.gentleguidance4dogs.com](http://www.gentleguidance4dogs.com).*