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CHANNEL 4 TELEVISION

# Copying TV dog trainers 'can make your pet worse'

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TELEVISION dog trainers use "ridiculous" techniques that can do more harm than good, according to scientists.

Researchers found that methods to assert dominance over pets advocated by the late Barbara Woodhouse and others, could increase aggression in animals.

They claimed that each series "puts back animal behaviour by 10 years" because they are built on the false assumption that dogs are constantly trying to dominate the pack - whether that be other animals or humans - and must be put in their place.

Experts at the University of Bristol's Department of Clinical Veterinary Sciences said it was far more effective to train dogs through reward rather than punishment. Behaving aggressively only made dogs scared and confused and more likely to lash out, they said.

"The problem is that some trainers are not qualified," said Dr Rachel Casey, a senior lecturer in companion animal behaviour and welfare.

"They are just hired to look good. There are huge welfare implications in having this stuff on television."

Dr Casey and her team spent six months studying dogs at a Dogs Trust rehoming centre, and reanalysing data from studies of feral dogs. They found that rather than fighting to be head of the pack, dogs were much more co-operative and tended to treat others like they were treated themselves. The

researchers concluded that training aimed at "dominance reduction" was therefore worthless and being aggressive only made dogs more likely to copy such behaviour.

Dr Casey, who published the findings in the *Journal of Veterinary Behaviour: Clinical Applications and Research*, said that methods such as instructing owners to eat before their dog or go through doors first would not influence a dog's perception of its relationship with its owner.

Techniques such as pinning dogs to the floor, grabbing jowls, blasting hooters or using an electric collar made them anxious about their owner and potentially more aggressive, she claimed. "The blanket assumption that every dog is motivated by some innate desire to control people and other dogs is frankly ridiculous," said Dr Casey.

"Owners are often horrified when we explain that their dog is terrified of them, and is showing aggression because of the techniques they have used, but it's not their fault when they have been advised to do so. Being consistent and rewarding good behaviour is so much better than punishment."

Chris Laurence, a veterinary director at the Dogs Trust, said: "We can tell when a dog comes in to us which has been subjected to the 'dominance reduction technique' so beloved of TV dog trainers. Sadly, many



**Victoria Stilwell, star of *It's Me or the Dog*, is a passionate opponent of 'outdated' dominance techniques**

techniques used to teach a dog that his owner is leader of the pack is counter-productive."

Victoria Stilwell, star of *It's Me Or the Dog* on Channel 4, also opposes such methods. A spokesman said: "Victoria has been a vocal opponent of dog trainers on television and in private practice who continue to promote outdated dominance-based philosophies.

"As a passionate advocate of

positive reinforcement training methods, Victoria is firmly against and has never advocated practices such as going through the door before the dog, pinning dogs to the floor, grabbing jowls or using electric shock collars [against which she has campaigned for years]. She is committed to debunking myths surrounding outdated, scientifically flawed, dominance-based philosophies."