

No neurotic dogs: Expert trains with rewards, not force

By **Diedtra Henderson**
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Want that precious pooch to sit, stay and stop gnawing on your designer shoes?

Never, never lace obedience commands with an electronic zap, brute force or a mean-spirited yell.

How demeaning. Puppies, as it happens, have feelings too.

Animal behaviorists such as Littleton-based Rhea Dodd ply their puppies with reduced-fat peanut butter and well-timed petting to create mellow mammals.

Does the vacuum scare the daylight out of a canine? No fear is too great that a little quality time with a singing Peter Cottontail can't conquer.

For the pets, the stakes are high: Bad behavior can send an animal to the pound, where euthanasia was a real threat for 6,823 pets taken in by Denver's Dumb Friends League last year.

"They're just magnets for trouble," Dodd said of rambunctious puppies, all lawless energy in the wrong hands. "They'll find the worst thing and go get it."

Dodd is on the lookout for the "crazed look," warning of a wilding spree to come, that overtakes the face of Chaz. The 10-week-old border collie was born to lead his litter of six. Before Chaz stops, stares or tenses, Dodd has interrupted the delinquency and substituted acceptable behavior.

A toy filled with peanut butter replaces the cruddy discoveries — or human flesh — a puppy might prefer to chew on. A bone smeared with cheese is the reward for sterling behavior inside his playpen. A few hand claps and some cubes of cheese encourage Chaz to approach or stay, long before he understands the meaning of the commands "come" or "sit."

"Dogs aren't that verbal. They go by body language. I want to get the behavior before I put a word on it," Dodd said, demonstrating as the compliant puppy neared. "Chaz-er, good boy. Good boy. Yeah, good dog."

If it sounds like transferring New Age parenting techniques into the animal kingdom, you heard right.



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Animal behaviorist Rhea Dodd uses 10-week-old Chaz to demonstrate an ineffective method for teaching puppies how to overcome their fears. Dodd favors treats or toys to distract the dog and bring it slowly closer to the fearful object — in this case, a noisemaking bunny.

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Rhea Dodd, right,
animal behaviorist



"It's a lot like parenting: being authoritative but not authoritarian," Dodd said.

And, as the behavior gurus work with new owners — as they will on Nov. 1 in a group session in Cherry Creek sponsored by the Denver Area Veterinary Medical Society — they help to unravel unrealistic human expectations.

Many of the pets locked up in the pound are guilty of nothing more than acting the way any creature

would were it locked up with little exercise or companionship. True aggression is rare.

"The most common problem behavior that people do not accept in their dogs tends to be behaviors that have to do with a lot of energy, overstimulation — dogs jumping, dogs showing normal adolescent behaviors," said Linda Case, a lecturer in companion animal science at the University of Illinois.

The puppies are most malleable

from 5 to 12 weeks of age, when they're learning how to be a dog.

"In that age range, they learn very quickly, they bond very closely," Case said. "If he doesn't have any human interaction, at all, during that time it may be more difficult for him or her to bond. ... That doesn't mean it's impossible."

It is however, tougher to get a dog to ignore its genetics no matter how much peanut butter fills chew toys. Golden retrievers are hard-wired to retrieve, just as border collies think it's completely natural to herd a group of trotting schoolchildren.

Wanna teach a greyhound to play fetch? Good luck.

"Greyhounds are loath to pick anything up," Case said. "That's not in their developmental background."

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