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Trainers Leading the Change:

Expanding Your Role in Humane Education and Community Awareness, Part 3

Jenn Merritt, CPDT-KA

In this third installment in our series on professional trainers having a broader impact in their communities, we broach the topic of outreach and promoting reward-based training through community partnerships. This series has focused on a group of reward-based dog trainers in North Carolina collaborating on a grassroots effort to promote humane education, reward-based training methods, and training equipment alternatives to collars that hurt, startle and punish. Our organization, called K9 Kindness, knew that reaching out and creating partnerships within our community would allow us to touch more lives and have a greater impact, even with limited time and limited money. Since the vast majority of dog owners never pursue any formal training with their dogs, their main sources of information about dog training are the facility or individual they adopted their dog from, their veterinary practice, friends and family, and the internet or television. K9 Kindness is exploring several avenues of outreach focusing on the groups that influence dog owners the most. We will address three populations where an organization can target outreach efforts to increase the amount of reward-based, force-free training information in the community: rescue groups/shelters, veterinary practices and school systems. The challenge is how to approach these groups in a non-confrontational and non-judgmental manner, not coincidentally, mirroring the methods that we promote with dogs.

Approaching animal rescue organizations can be somewhat precarious, especially if they have a history of recommending traditional training methods. K9 Kindness volunteer Susan Mitchell runs C.A.R.E. for Animals, a rescue based in Raleigh, North Carolina and recently began pursuing a career as a professional dog trainer. Having seen the realities of rescue while working with training clients, she has a unique perspective on how reward-based trainers and rescues can break the ice and find common ground.

She explains, "Approaching anyone, especially with new ideas, can be tricky. I think the best approach is always a non-judgmental one, being careful with the language you use and the type of attitude you bring to the table. For example, offer your 'services' rather than offering your 'help.' 'Services' is about what you do; 'help' is about them needing you, and the implication is that they are having problems. I also like the term 'different'

as opposed to 'better' when discussing options. People tend to get on the defensive if you imply that your way is 'better' than theirs. Asking them what needs they have, rather than approaching them with what you can do for them, tells them that it is more about them than about you."

Mitchell contends that probably the biggest training obstacle for rescues is that most don't have the financial resources to send their dogs to basic classes or get professional assistance with dogs who have issues, so they rely primarily on foster homes and rescue staff to provide dogs with basic training and management foundations. She suggests that trainers could offer workshops in the basics of reward-based training with rescue staff for a nominal fee (or no fee) or offer a spot in a class to rescue groups for foster parents for a reduced fee. She adds, "Of course, offering them something they can really use is a good 'in'; discounts on services, listing them in your marketing efforts, and 'freebies' appeal to most everyone. Once you establish a relationship with someone, you're in a better position to offer constructive feedback or suggest alternate methods, etc."

Mitchell continues, "As both a trainer and a rescuer, one of my primary goals is to help dog owners to develop a greater bond with their pet, and that in turn will enable both to meet a better quality of life. I would love to see more rescue organizations and dog trainers partnering together publicly to sponsor both educational and fundraising events. The mission of both industries is to help animals and people, and both generally have a huge following of supporters, so imagine what can be achieved by pooling resources and working together!"

Partnering with animal shelters can also be complicated, especially if they are affiliated with county governments. Many shelters are feeling the effects of the economy with an overflow of animals, overworked staff, and stretched budgets, all of which limit their own outreach and community programs. There's no better time for trainers to step up, reach out, and offer their expertise. K9 Kindness approached our county shelters about offering a free monthly, one hour workshop for new dog adopters. The sessions are open to the public and geared to those who recently adopted dogs from the county's shelter. Topics covered include basic dog management

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(housetraining, chewing, etc.) and problem solving (jumping up, counter surfing, etc.). Additionally, shelter staff asked for our help in updating the materials that are sent home with each animal. This allowed us to provide them with the most up-to-date reward-based training resources to help set pet parents up for success.

Not surprisingly, veterinary clinics are often the gateway for dog owners to learn about behavior and training. There's no greater partner to have on your reward-based training team than a supportive veterinarian and his or her staff of technicians, assistants, and administrative personnel. The information and advice they provide to their clients can largely influence how a dog is socialized and trained. But it's not unusual for veterinarians and trainers to disagree about a number of issues, which can obviously set the stage for a rocky relationship.

Dr. Melanie Smith of Four Paws Animal Clinic in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, finds that professional trainers can be an invaluable resource for a veterinary practice. She believes that networking between vets and trainers is a win-win for everyone, including the dogs, and that both trainers and vets should make an effort to work together. She adds, "We all have a passion to improve their lives. A professional trainer imparts the importance of training on an ongoing basis. Most dogs only go the vet once a year, thus there is never enough time to address behavior issues unless other professionals are available. So often, vets are not consulted until there is a crisis situation. By referring clients to trainers, vets can outsource behavioral issues to get a professional evaluation and assess if further training, behavioral modification or drugs may be needed."

K9 Kindness is launching a veterinary outreach pilot program with the premise of creating collaborative partnership between trainers and veterinary practices. We'll begin with a series of interactive 45 minute presentations designed to be given during a lunch hour or a monthly staff meeting. Sessions will include demos on how to help clients enter/exit the clinic calmly, how to teach dogs to put themselves on the scale, desensitizing dogs to handling/restraint, etc. We'll also impart that the best way to create easy-to-handle, cooperative canine clients is by recommending socialization and handling exercises that are taught in reward-based training classes. We hope they will come to understand that puppies trained with reward-based methods grow up to be dogs who are more likely to trust people, more handleable, and easier to control. We'll be focusing on how reward-based methods benefit everyone, from the collars that are recommended to the advice given on early socialization/training.

Other areas to consider are reaching out to veterinary students and programs that train veterinary technicians. Even if you don't live near a school that offers veterinary medicine degrees, chances are there are community colleges that offer technician or vet assistant programs.

All of these programs solicit guest speakers to lecture on selected topics (with many of the slots taken up by representatives of drug companies). Offering to provide a lecture or demo can open the door to other opportunities. K9 Kindness made contact with the student behavior club at North Carolina State University and offered an hour-long lunchtime presentation for over 60 future vets on how to use reward-based training techniques in their clinics. The response was so positive we were asked back to do a follow up on safe leash walking techniques and to participate in the vet school's annual "Dog Olympics," a public event for hundreds of dog owners.

At public events, members of K9 Kindness learned quickly that we could talk about reward-based training until we were blue in the face, but nothing got the general public's attention more than talking about programs for children. Anytime the topic of humane education for kids was mentioned, people lit up with interest, and then wanted to know more about our ideas and goals. It was apparent that developing a program for children had one great advantage: enthusiastic buy-in from adults.

As a group of dog trainers, many of whom had often done presentations for schools, scout troops, and other children's groups, we acknowledged that we didn't know the first thing about creating a more formal humane education program for children. Quite unexpectedly, a quick internet search found that one of the leading humane education programs for children was created in Moore County, North Carolina, right in our backyard.

The Moore County Pet Responsibility Committee (www.mcprc.org) was created by Angela Zumwalt and Pam Partis to address overwhelming pet overpopulation and chronic problems of animal neglect in their county. Earlier efforts to address these issues were plagued by resistance from various groups. Zumwalt and Partis decided that the logical step was to find a way to collaborate on a program that all the stakeholders would support, foregoing the conflicts to concentrate on educating the next generation of pet owners.

Zumwalt explains, "We took a couple of years to come to the conclusion that presenting in the schools was the most effective way to promote Pet Responsibility and the most efficient use of volunteer time. We had tried presenting to adult audiences and at various events with limited success. Presenting the Pet Responsibility Program within the structured environment of a school gives us a 'captive' audience that is ready to listen and learn. We can be sure that we have presented the program to a large portion of the population of a specific age and know that if we continue year after year, the number of 'informed' people keeps growing."

They created a six week, one hour per week curriculum for fourth graders that addressed the importance of spay/neuter, responsible pet guardianship, dog bite prevention

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and safety around all animals, selecting an appropriate pet for your lifestyle and budget, and animal advocacy. Fourth graders were targeted specifically because they are receptive to the messages of the program and are able to discuss what they learn in the program with their families. By design, the program fulfilled national core curriculum and state course of study requirements by focusing on "character education," while integrating math, science, and art, making it a valuable resource for teachers and the county.

Started as a pilot program in one school five years ago, the Moore County Pet Responsibility Program has grown to being taught to 1,000 students annually thanks in large part to a growing cadre of volunteers that includes retired teachers, animal rescuers and advocates, and pet professionals. The program is also being replicated by other counties in North Carolina and beyond due in large part to Zumwalt and Partis's willingness to share the program freely. Their entire curriculum, along with supporting materials and information about teaching aids, can be downloaded in its entirety from their website (mcprc.org). There is a version of the lesson plans that can be easily edited for other counties or communities. The MCPRC also provides yearly updates to their program and training sessions so that other humane educators or volunteers can learn about the program.

Zumwalt's advice for implementing a low-cost program in your community is to start by downloading their

program and reading through it. She adds, "The only cost would be copies for the classroom and copies on card stock of some of the graphics. You could present the program to one school on a very small budget. The most important activity is 'selling' the program to the first school. We approached a school where the principal was a known pet lover and very open to the program."

Inspired by the MCPRC, K9 Kindness is about to roll out our pilot program for a seven week curriculum for fourth graders, with a week added to address reward-based training and understanding canine (and feline) body language. We plan to expand this and our other programs in 2013 and share our results with other trainers and organizations.

In conclusion, our hope is that these collective and collaborative efforts will empower us to lead the change toward a more humane community together. Anyone that is interested in learning more about our programs or using our materials, please visit our website (www.k9kindness.org) or contact us at info@k9kindness.org.

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