

# Control, Compassion, and Choices

## (Part 1 of 2)

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**O**n a visit to the United Kingdom last fall, I (RV) witnessed an interesting series of events. Tracie, my coauthor for this article, and I were conducting an animal assisted play therapy (AAPT) training with a small group of child mental health therapists, with training exercises alternately involving horses and dogs. We involved two of Tracie's horses, a Gypsy Vanner (Sailor) and an Arab (Buster), both of whom she rescued several years ago. At the time, she had just begun working with two ponies, a Shetland Pony (Freddie) and a Welsh Pony (Jerry), from a nearby children's riding club. I had previously seen these ponies at work, taking one small child after another on a ride around the roads, led by an older child or adult. At the end of their riding season, Tracie brought the ponies to her farm for some respite and to work with some behavioral issues. All four equines were available for our workshop.

Our first activity involved observing and getting to know the horses, all from ground level. When the human group quietly joined Sailor and Buster in the paddock, both horses immediately walked to them, ears forward, sniffing of hands and pockets, showing interest in the new humans. Later, when the group joined Freddie and Jerry, the ponies immediately walked in the opposite direction, standing apart from the group, ears back or flicking with little eye contact or apparent interest. It took several exercises during our four-day training before the ponies approached a couple people, took carrots from them, or showed any interest at all.

The reactions of the ponies were vividly different from the horses. Why? The ponies actually had had much more contact with a variety of humans than the horses had, so "exposure to people" did not seem to be the answer. One possible explanation rose above the others: the horses had developed strong and positive relationships with the people in their lives and this transferred readily to newcomers. The ponies experienced many children plopped onto their backs and were treated kindly, but their relationship to people was solely a functional one. When I returned to the UK several months later, Freddie and Jerry were transformed — interested, relaxed, and eager to interact with people — all the benefit of having developed positive associations and relationships with humans. This experience prompted us to explore in this two-part series some core dimensions that influence our relationships with nonhuman animals: control, compassion, and choices.

### Control

The study of human psychology has clearly established the importance of control for people's well-being. Without a sense of control in their lives, people are prone to depression, anxiety, helplessness, poor social relationships, and even poor health. Nevertheless, the issue of control has been a source of confusion for individuals and societies. Often, we try to control the wrong things ... our children, spouses, the animals who live and work with us. We, as a species, have developed harsh and punitive methods for dealing with children, horses, dogs, and others. "Spare the rod, spoil the child" is an axiom that survives, and over half of parents in the U.S. still use spanking to correct child misbehavior despite its many drawbacks. "Breaking" horses and "dominating" dogs all stem from the same line of thinking. Use of punishment-oriented, aversive, or coercive methods persist, such as whips, harsh bits in the mouth, and forceful reining techniques with horses and choke, prong, and shock collars with dogs. While these >



The ponies had just arrived with no relationship-building and when they first met the training group. Not a great picture but shows the contrast with the horses.

methods give the illusory impression that they work, the fact is that if they do, it is mostly in the short run and they do not work very well when the “punisher” is not present. (If you doubt this, just watch the cars around you when drivers become aware that a police car is just ahead, and again once they are past the “speed trap” and the threat of a ticket has passed!) Furthermore, such methods do not build positive relationships between human and animal, nor do they provide enjoyment in the animal’s life. They build fear and avoidance rather than connection and cooperation.

The trouble with aversive training methods is that they do not instill in the recipient a desire to comply. The other problem is that we can never truly control another being. We can force them to do our bidding, but left on their own without immediate consequences, what would they be doing? In reality, the only thing we can truly control is ourselves, but that often requires an inward look and facing the fact that none of us is perfect. We might even suggest that the vehemence with which some aversive trainers cling to their methods is because they fear the loss of control that changing to more positive, but less familiar, methods might mean for them! The ultimate prize, however, in recognizing that we cannot truly control another, is a freeing of ourselves and an opening of ourselves to the excitement of new ideas and better results.

While working with a new group of teenagers in equine assisted therapy with my horses, I (TF) noticed some of the teens who’d had prior horse experience holding the lead ropes very tightly. Others had taught them that “horses will run away if you don’t control them tightly and keep the lead rope taut.” The teens tried to get the horses to trot while holding them this way, but none of the horses complied. I asked them to let the rope go slack, to quit staring at the horses, and to start running themselves while trusting that the horse would run with them. To the teens’ amazement, all horses immediately followed. The teens later said they had learned that “less is more.”

Lest any of us positive, non-coercive, humane trainers begin to feel too satisfied with ourselves, however, we want to challenge those who work with positive methods to think carefully about the role of control in that work as well! For a moment, imagine some parents who have learned to use behavior modification with their children and begin to apply it at every turn. Their focus is on molding and changing their children’s behavior to some desired endpoint, perhaps to become rocket scientists or Stepford wives. Those children might grow up and behave precisely as their parents wanted, but without parental attention to other factors, such as love, relationship, and shared fun times, the human connection is likely to be missing. Without that, how enjoyable would these children’s lives be? Could they participate in healthy marriages and families? Could they think for themselves? Would they reach their full potential?

Any form of behavior modification, including positive methods, includes an element of control. While most of us use behavioral methods toward the worthy goal of helping people and dogs live happily together, even positive approaches can lead to over-control and overtraining. Last year, I (RV) met a dog brought for me to do a demonstration of AAPT at a conference. The dog was exceptionally well-behaved. Her owner was a pleasant man who used only positive methods and who clearly loved his dog. The dog could perform many tricks flawlessly and seemed, on the surface, to be an ideal dog for demonstration. I was bothered, however, by the vacant look in the dog’s eyes and the dog’s unwillingness to engage with anyone for any reason other than food. There was something robotic about the dog — she lacked connection and simply waited for instructions so she could perform her next behavior and receive her treat. Prior to my presentation, I tried many things to see if I could get the dog simply to interact with me or to play, even bouncing around on the floor in a play bow myself. Nothing. I simply could not get a glimpse of the dog’s real self. I felt sad. As trainers, we might know what went wrong here — perhaps the food reinforcers were never faded or were given too mechanically. Even so, the bigger problem was that the dog’s natural personality had been rendered unrecognizable by a focus on training, and only training. It was positive reinforcement taken to an extreme, leading to an over-controlled dog who showed no spontaneity or joyfulness at all.

In essence, being in control and being controlling are two different things. Being in control refers to being in control of oneself and having the confidence to let others be in control of themselves, whether human, equine, canine, or other species. It’s when we become controlling of others that harm can be done. Positive training is a very useful tool to build harmony and specific behaviors, but it’s not meant to be the only way of life.

### Compassion

Compassion usually refers to an awareness and empathy for another’s feelings, especially suffering, or tenderness toward another. We now know that nonhuman animals have feelings, just as we do. Dogs’ “emotional brains” are nearly identical to our own, and it is accepted that they share many of the same basic emotions that we have, e.g., glad, sad, mad, and afraid (Bekoff, 2007; Panksepp, 2005). Emotions are critical for connection, for relationship, for partnership. In her groundbreaking book on the role of oxytocin in human-animal bonding, Olmert (2009) makes a strong case for the use of humane treatment and training, largely because the related release of oxytocin helps overcome fear, build relationships, and enhance the possibilities. Clothier’s (2002) work reveals how every interaction we have with another can build or erode our relationship, and how empathic, mutual relationships help all participants achieve their goals and potential much more *[continued on next page]*

effectively. Bradford's (2011) excellent book uses substantial accumulated scientific knowledge to dispel myths and misinformation that have been used to support harsh approaches with dogs. Just as in our human relationships there's value in both work and play, our human-animal relationships are best served when they include fun and "downtime" as a complement to training and work. There need to be times when dogs don't have to be fulfilling our often-unrealistic and confusing expectations of them — when they can just be dogs. We would propose that adopting a less controlling and more compassionate stance toward the animals in our lives can lead to a more enriching experience for all involved. This is equally true for working animals. There are many people who work effectively with their dogs or horses in a variety of capacities who still share lots of play time and who delight in letting the animal's real nature come out.

Having true empathy for an animal means that we consider his or her point of view and make decisions with that in mind. Most readers of this article are probably very familiar with canine communication signals (or should be!), but that's simply the first step. We recognize that the dog is stressed. What then? Do we simply begin our behavioral interventions to help the dog do what we wanted in the first place but with less stress? Or do we stop and think further about why the dog is stressed and whether or not it really needs to do what we wanted it to do? Truly hearing another's communication means that sometimes we are the ones who change — our plans and our expectations.

After my (RV) highly traumatized, semi-feral Aussie, Katie (from puppy mill to living in the woods on her own as a puppy), became more social and comfortable with our human, canine, and feline family, she spent most of her time with us all in the family room. After joining us in the family room for several months, she began jumping the gate and removing herself from us in the evenings, returning periodically but for less time. I couldn't determine anything in the environment or in the other dogs' behaviors that may have been contributing to her "avoidant behavior." My first reaction was a Risk-centered one, assuming that I knew what was best for her, and I blocked her escape route with a second gate "to keep her from practicing avoidant behaviors." As I thought about it further, however, I knew she had her own reason for needing to remove herself sometimes from the family scene, even though I could not fully comprehend it. She was telling us that she was not happy being there all the time. I decided to let her make that decision for herself and took down the extra gate, returning to the Katie-centered approach that had worked initially in overcoming many of her fears. Her choice to go upstairs on her own was not hurting anyone. Her behavior overall was more relaxed. Over time, she began increasing her time with the family again. As I let go of my desire to figure it all out and to control all her time with us (unrealistic expectations of >



The horses greeting the training group.



The ponies after some relationship-building time, eagerly greeting Tracie.



Shetland Pony in his regular job giving kids rides. This is before he came to Tracie's or had any relationship work.

her and me!), the situation became more comfortable for Katie and for me. I just needed to let Katie have some control to work it out in her own way.

I (TF) learned much about the equine point of view during my childhood in a Gypsy family with a recorded history as horse specialists going at least as far back as the 16th century. (It's well documented that my ancestors had an aptitude with horses, not least as accomplished horse thieves during the Scottish Border uprisings, stealing horses for the aristocracy — and you need to understand horses if you're going to steal them successfully!). We taught horses by "gentling" them, a term not heard often today. The lessons learned from my family and the countless horses and ponies I've known have confirmed that relationship is the key to successful teaching, working, and living with horses.

It is common for riders to think that horses are deliberately "naughty" or stubborn. People often tell me that on a ride their horse has stopped suddenly "for no reason." What they really mean is that from the human point of view, no reason is apparent, but with the horse's superior senses, it is certain that the horse is reacting to something. Riders have explained that since they do not use whips, they sat for 45 minutes "gently cajoling" the horse to move until the horse "eventually gave up" and the rider "won." I doubt the horse even knew it was in a competition! Many riders refuse to get off the horse, believing it will reinforce the horse's stopping. Looking at it from the horse's point of view, however, suggests that the horse might be anxious and is waiting for a herd leader to go first. Don't we all want that sometimes? Jumping off the horse to check out the scary item (rider in the leadership role) usually resolves the situation quickly, saving 45 frustrating minutes for the rider and making the situation feel safer for the horse. Never have my horses stopped when riding past the same spot later on, unless there is some new scary thing there. Horses just don't need to "win." Harmony in the herd is what they strive for. And we know we cannot reinforce feelings, the root cause of the horse's behavior in this situation (VanFleet, 2011).

Despite being a very different species, we now know that the same is true for dogs. When we loosen our grip on our controlling tendencies, pay attention to the dogs' feelings, look at the entire context and consider their points of view, we are more likely to handle situations in ways that build our relationships and trust with our dogs, leading to behavior improvements as well. In the next segment of this series, we will discuss simple ways of giving animals choices that build their confidence in themselves and their trust in us.

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