

**ASSOCIATION OF PET DOG TRAINERS  
DOGWISE/JOHN FISHER WRITING CONTEST 2001  
1<sup>ST</sup> PLACE WINNER**

*“The K9 VIP Program: A New Way to ‘Talk Dog’”*

**By Terry Long, CPDT**

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*Lassie Come Home*, *The Incredible Journey*, *Old Yeller*, and *101 Dalmatians*—all stories of extraordinary animal feats—have warmed the hearts of countless American families for decades. These tales of canine devotion and courage evoke our compassion, love, and awe. Who among us does not dream of someday having a dog with whom there is that special bond, a bond reminiscent of these storied dogs and their human companions?

Unfortunately, these glorified stories of the human-dog bond contrast starkly with the reality being lived by many pet dogs and their families. Instead of Lassie, many of us get real dogs—dogs who dig, chew, bark, jump, and, in some cases, bite the hand that feeds it.

Champion, a seven-week-old yellow Labrador mix, was adopted by two young girls and their mother in an emotional moment outside a grocery store. When the father called a professional trainer for help a few months later, Champion had already been relegated to life as a backyard dog.

“He’s just too wild. He jumps. He bites. He steals things. He’s totally out of *control*,” lamented the father, adding, “I don’t even know if we can keep him if he keeps this up. He’s more out of control than ever. Can you train him so we can go outside without getting beat up?”

When asked why they got a dog, many pet dog owners mention companionship, loyalty, protection, friendship, and family. No wonder so many pet owners become frustrated and disillusioned with living with a dog. Instead of a relationship, they get soiled carpets, excavated gardens, and complaining neighbors.

It would be easy to blame this disconnect with reality on the popular media. After all, aren’t the movie and television producers at least partly to blame for their role in spreading these myths? Perhaps they are, but such stories sell because humans seem to have an insatiable appetite for them.

If we are to point fingers, perhaps we dog trainers should look in the mirror. With the best of intentions, we may be unwittingly contributing to a skewed view of what it means to share our lives with dogs. How? By selling control (commonly called obedience) instead of relationship building.

Every time we answer the phone and promote obedience training as the solution to prospective clients’ problems, we miss an opportunity to change the way the public views their relationship with their dogs. Every time we tell clients to show their dogs who is boss, suggest ways to correct problem behavior, or push obedience classes, we unwittingly contribute to people’s view of dogs as animals that must be controlled at all costs.

### **Change Through What We Call It**

It starts with semantics. Just as our language changed to embrace all kinds of human rights movements, the words we use to talk about dogs are important in conveying our philosophy of “relationship” to our clients.

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How often do we hear that a new puppy owner has been told that he or she needs to show dominance over the pup? Owners are taught to roll their puppies and hold them down until they submit, to scruff-shake, and to use other physical punishments for infractions such as puppy mouthing or jumping. These techniques and a host of others are meant to demonstrate human dominance, *aka* control?

How would it sound if we changed some of the semantics? If, instead of “correct,” we used the word “show”? Or we replaced the word “obedience” with “manners”? (For more substitutions, see Table 1: Old vs. New Language.)

**Table 1: Old vs. New Language**

<b>Old Language</b>	<b>New Language</b>
Dominate	Influence
Control	Trust and teach
Obedience	Manners
Submission exercises	Handling exercises
Dominance	Deference
Setups/proofing	Evaluate training progress
Correct	Show
Command	Cue
Tell	Ask

Words matter. Subtle changes in semantics can mean the difference between a client deciding his dog is “blowing him off” or giving the dog the benefit of the doubt, going back to the basics, and working to bring the goal behavior to true fluency.

### **Change Through What We Sell**

Trainers have a challenging job. We work with many kinds of people who have differing perceptions of dog ownership. Some of us may cringe at the lost potential that results when owners are satisfied simply to have their dogs not jump, bark, or dig. We are, however, in the unique position of being able to shape not only dog behavior, but also the attitudes and expectations of our clients.

Education starts with how we, and/or our staff, respond to phone inquiries. Using compassionate interview techniques, we can help prospects recognize that what they really want is close bonding with their dogs. We can help them realize that they’ve lowered their expectations because of frustration and exhaustion. We can help them understand that “controlling” or “correcting” problem behaviors is not going to be the full solution. We can help direct them toward training alternatives that rely on management, play training, reward-focused techniques and, most importantly, careful control of all the good things in their dog’s life. By doing so, we can help each dog see his or her owner as a Very Influential Person (VIP) ... which is the first step in building a lifelong bond with Lassie or Old Yeller.

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### **Change Through What We Teach**

Champion, the backyard Labrador, had quickly become *canis non gratis* because his family didn't know any better than to attempt to correct bad behavior. They tried everything: spankings, holding his mouth shut when he mouthed or nipped, kneeling him in the chest when he jumped, and a host of other punishments for behavior they didn't want. When none of these things worked, they felt they had no option but to banish the dog from the house. After increasingly frustrating interactions with Champion in the backyard, they seldom went outside and they walked him less and less. Sound familiar?

When Dave, Champion's owner, called to get professional help, his initial inquiry was about boarding and training while he laid new sod to repair the excavated backyard. During his phone discussion with the trainer, he began to understand that he would be throwing his money away. Instead of boarding and training, he was encouraged to spend his money on in-home consultation—in essence, a customized program that would focus on making each family member a center of influence in Champion's life.

After the first meeting with the trainer, Champion regained house privileges. Over the next several months, his family learned to rebuild the relationship through controlling not the dog, but his resources—such as food, treats, toys, and petting. At a particularly trying time, Dave was offered the chance to rehome Champion to an interested party. He declined. Even though Champion was a handful, Dave was now seeing another side to him, one that evoked feelings of canine companionship and camaraderie.

### **Influence Every Day in Every Way**

#### ***Be Captivating***

So what does being a VIP look like to dogs? First and foremost, people must learn how to be captivating to dogs. Think of all the descriptions that come to mind when we describe a person to whom we are attracted:

- Charismatic
- Inspiring
- Irresistible
- Provocative
- Stimulating
- Exuding animal magnetism

How could you resist someone with all these attributes? The old saying, “He can charm the birds out of the trees” says it best.

Trainers may need to get down on the floor and show their clients what it looks like. Canadian trainer Susan Garrett demonstrates one of the best examples of being completely and irresistibly captivating

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when she plays a game she calls “Smoke Ya.” This is a high-intensity game of tag, around furniture, throughout the house. What does it teach the dog besides just being plain fun? That finding and keeping up with his or her human is the best thing happening.

### *Games VIPs Play*

VIPs use a multitude of fun activities to build influence with their dogs (see Table 2: Fun Activities and What They Teach).

**Table 2: Fun Activities and What They Teach**

<b>Activity</b>	<b>What it Teaches</b>
Hide and seek	Come and attention
Problem-solving games (e.g., get the treat out of the bottle)	Problem-solving skills and continual learning
Nose work	Develops a natural ability
Musical chairs	Stay
Eye Contact Game	Attention and the first step in loose leash walking
Tug with the 3 Rules	1) Sit/down 2) No mouthing 3) Relinquishment
Retrieve (variety of objects)	Picking up and relinquishing items
Gotcher Body	Handling for examinations and grooming
Tricks (e.g., spin, rollover, crawl)	Mental stimulation and continual learning
101 Things*	Mental stimulation and continual learning

\* “101 Things To Do With a Box” was popularized by clicker trainer Karen Pryor. The dog is shaped to interact with an inanimate object in some way determined by the trainer (e.g., to tap the object with the nose, push it across the floor, paw at it).

None of the activities listed in Table 2 takes a lot of space or expensive equipment. Anyone can do them. Each activity is highly interactive, provides good physical exercise, promotes attention and focus, is mentally stimulating, and teaches essential skills to dogs cohabitating with humans.

### *Controlling Resources*

VIPs are also astute at controlling resources. Here are two easy techniques:

- **Nothing In Life Is Free/No Free Lunch.** Everything the dog wants in life should be earned, especially in his or her formative months. By simply asking the dog to perform a task (e.g., sit, down, spin, bow, sit pretty) before being fed, petted, or walked, we establish our VIP role.

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- **Umbilical Cord and Tethering.** Tying a cloth clothesline to a pup’s collar and attaching it to us can very easily teach a young pup to follow us and pay attention to us. Tethering a pup to a stationery object and giving her a toy to play with while we are nearby develops settling—and allows us to supervise her activities.

### **VIPs Are Addictive**

People who learn to be VIPs learn to play games with their dogs. They learn to be charismatic and captivating, rather than controlling and correcting. VIPs become “addictive” to their dogs in the best possible sense of the word—by behaving in a way that results in the dogs’ enthusiastic devotion and attachment to their owners.

Reward-focused trainers know what this addiction is all about. It’s what they do with their own dogs because they’ve seen how successfully it builds influence and strengthens the human-dog relationship.

Isn’t it time for us to teach VIP behavior to our clients? Isn’t it time to help our clients realize their dream of having the best canine companion in the world? Even if the family dog may never behave like Lassie and rescue Timmy from the well, he or she can surely become a treasured and beloved pet.