Prior to seeking the counsel of a veterinary behaviourist many owners have attempted behaviour modification techniques suggested by a variety of sources. Recommendations often include aversive training techniques, which may provoke fearful or defensively aggressive behaviour. Owners of such dogs often turn to friends, family and the internet for help, while others turn to the advice of dog trainers. There are a variety of methods available for altering problem behaviours. For example many people pursue positive reinforcement training with a clicker, or food stuffed, “pacifier” toys. Some owners use food as reinforcement for desired behaviours, such as teaching a dog to make eye contact on verbal cue in the presence of challenging stimuli. It is also not uncommon to see more aversive techniques, such as the choke or pinch collar, the shock collar, or even as a more extreme example, “stringing up” or helicoptering a dog. Other more confrontational methods involve physical manipulation, such as the “dominance down” and scruffing the dog. A variety of options exist, but what is the reliability of the information available to owners? A study published by Lord et al. found that most owners of dogs with problem behaviours did not seek the advice of their veterinarian.¹ This suggests owners are relying more on trainers and “lay’ resources for help. Currently, quality control of the information and services provided by trainers and in the popular media is lacking. Some of the more confrontational techniques may provoke aggression and are dangerous for owners to implement themselves. This lack of standardisation and variable effect leaves dog owners confused and at risk of injury when attempting to correct problem behaviours.

In 2009 we conducted a study to assess the behavioural effects and safety risks of techniques used historically by owners of dogs with behaviour problems. A 30-item survey of previous interventions was included in a behavioural questionnaire distributed to all dog owners making appointments at a referral behaviour service over a one-year period. For each intervention applied, owners were asked to indicate whether there was a positive, negative, or lack of effect on the dog’s behaviour, and whether aggressive behaviour was seen in association with the method used. Owners were also asked to indicate the source of each recommendation.

One-hundred-forty surveys were completed. Presenting complaints (as classified from the behavioural history questionnaire) included aggression to unfamiliar people (or people who did not live and interact with the dog on a regular basis), aggression to familiar people, aggression to dogs (both familiar and unfamiliar), specific fears or anxiety (such as thunderstorm fear), separation anxiety, and other. Most of the dogs presented for

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aggression and most had more than one presenting complaint. The most frequently listed recommendation sources were “self” and “trainers”. Several confrontational methods such as “hit or kick dog for undesirable behaviour” (43%), “growl at dog” (41%), “physically force the release of an item from a dog’s mouth” (39%), “alpha roll” (31%), “stare at or stare [dog] down” (30%), “dominance down” (29%), and “grab dog by jowls and shake” (26%) elicited an aggressive response from at least a quarter of the dogs on which they were attempted. Dogs presenting for aggression to unfamiliar people were more likely to respond aggressively to the use of many of the confrontational techniques, compared to dogs with other presenting complaints.

The finding that dogs with aggression to familiar people are more likely to react aggressively to confrontational methods was not surprising. This result is especially important as it highlights the risks associated with the various dominance training techniques made popular by television, books, and many punishment-based training advocates. Dominance methods often involve the owner’s physical manipulation and intimidation as a means of establishing themselves as the “alpha” or boss of the dog. These techniques are fear eliciting and can lead to owner directed aggression in many cases, as demonstrated by this study. In conclusion, confrontational methods applied by dog owners before their pets were presented for a behaviour consultation were associated with aggressive responses in many cases. It is thus important for primary care veterinarians to advise owners about risks associated with such training methods and provide guidance and resources for safe management of behaviour problems.

References