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## Try a Little Tenderness: Non-Aversive Training Works Best for Dogs

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“As my husband says, most people go to the islands of the Turks and Caicos and bring back conch shells as souvenirs,” said Julie Williamson. “We bring back dogs.” And not just any kind of dog; Julie, an attorney from Moorestown, N.J., has brought back two “potcake” dogs, named for dogs fed whatever is left “caked in the pot.”

Potcakes are found on the islands of the Turks and Caicos, where the feral dog population is growing; tourists and locals alike have been known to find entire litters without homes. Three years ago, Julie and her family adopted nine-week old Turq. A bright and active puppy, he was so used to his island home that he was tentative and frightened when placed on the carpet in the Williamsons’ home. Strangers scared him, as did other dogs. His owners sought help from trainers who used aversive training methods, with poor results, and so turned to the Behavior Clinic at the Matthew J. Ryan Veterinary Hospital.

“Turq presented to me two years ago for aggression to unfamiliar people and dogs, both inside his home and on leash walks,” said **Dr. Meghan Herron**, behavior resident. “At his initial visit, his level of fear was higher than most patients I see here. It was clear the motivation for his behavior was pure terror of new people and most dogs.”

His owners had attempted various interventions to change this behavior, from harsh verbal reprimands and leash corrections to growling at him. “Nothing seemed to be working and Turq was becoming fearful even of his owners,” said Dr. Herron. “I gave the Williamsons a plan to reduce Turq’s fearful behavior and to teach him new behavioral responses to the approach of strangers and dogs.”

The Williamsons learned how to “read” their dog, and they built trust by not putting him in stressful situations he could not handle. “I’m afraid that some of his fears today are from those techniques we tried when he was younger,” said Julie. “Dr. Herron brought a new world to Turq—one that includes positive trust-building between dog and humans.”

Effective training is critical in cases like Turq’s. Dr. Herron is the lead author of a new, year-long survey of dog owners who use confrontational or aversive methods to train aggressive pets; she and her fellow researchers found that most of these animals will continue to be



Julie Williamson (left), Dr. Meghan Herron and Turq. Photo by John Donges.

aggressive unless training techniques are modified. The study, published in the February issue of *Applied Animal Behavior Science*, also showed that using non-aversive or neutral training methods such as additional exercise or rewards elicited very few aggressive responses.

“Nationwide, the number-one reason dog owners take their pets to a veterinary behaviorist is to manage aggressive behavior,” said Dr. Herron. “Our study demonstrated that many confrontational training methods, whether staring down dogs, striking them or intimidating them with physical manipulation does little to correct improper behavior and can elicit aggressive responses.”

The Williamsons participated in the study and have since changed their approach to training. “Although Turq will always be a somewhat fearful dog and will always need to be introduced to new people in a special fashion, his behaviors are now easily managed by his family and their leash walks are safe and enjoyable,” said Dr. Herron.

“Turq is an intelligent dog, but sometimes he has a misguided sense of danger. Our job is to channel his stress properly and respect his boundaries. I think of him as a work in progress,” said Julie. “There are still situations that he is not comfortable in, but the difference is that we can tell from his body language how he is feeling and we can act accordingly.”

Turq was recently joined by Ben, another potcake dog from the islands. “I don’t think we’ll be adopting any more potcake dogs, though,” said Julie. “Now that I think about it, my husband hasn’t taken me back to the islands since we got Ben.”

For more information on “potcake dogs,” please visit [www.potcakeplace.com](http://www.potcakeplace.com). 🐾