

Choice

Arguably the most important element in dog training

Consider the following diagram. This is a pyramid depicting the rank of your dogs needs.

Hierarchy of Dog Needs®

Standards of Care and Best Force-free Practices

There is never a justification to use pain, fear, dominance devices or training methods with our dogs.

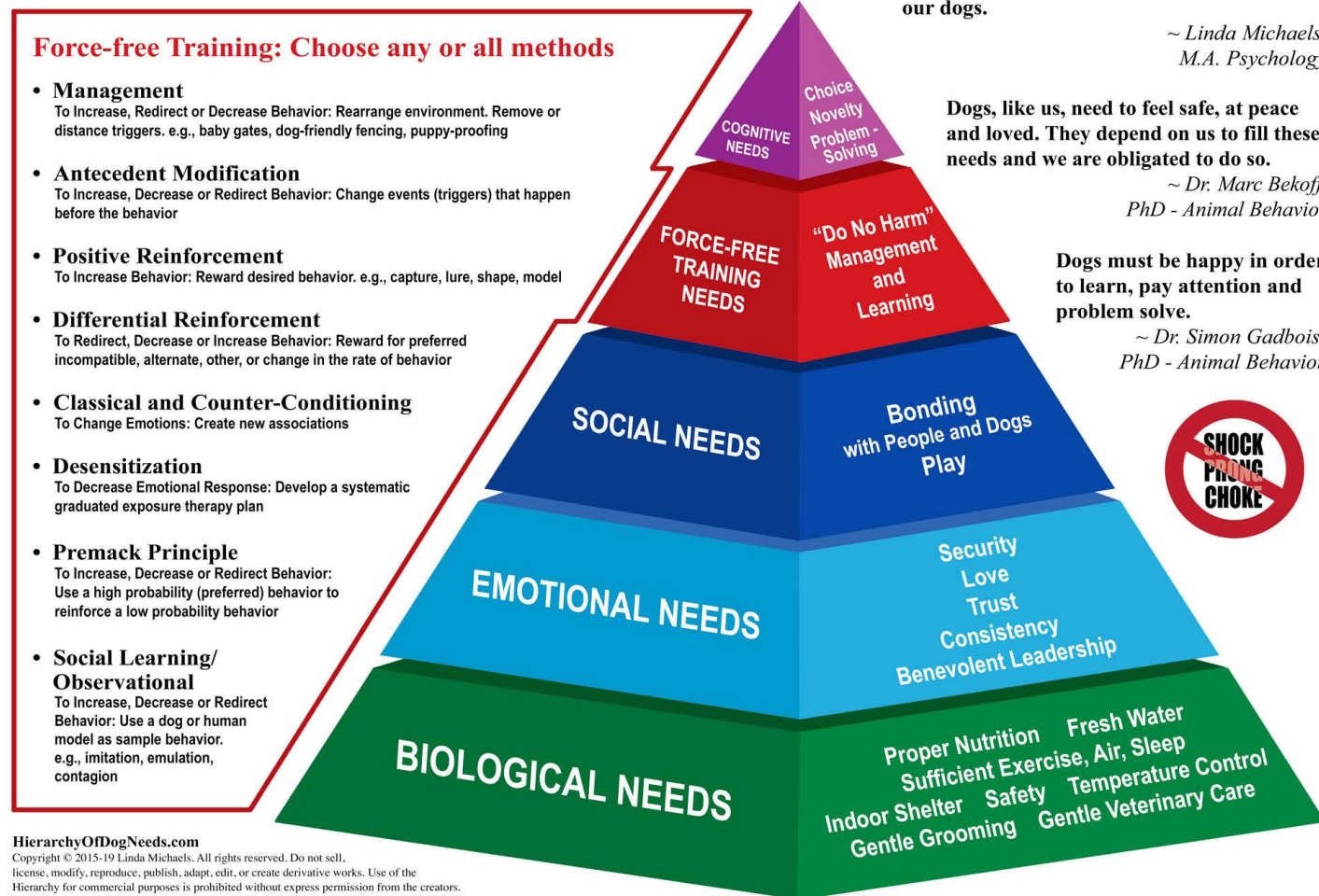
~ Linda Michaels,
M.A. Psychology

Dogs, like us, need to feel safe, at peace and loved. They depend on us to fill these needs and we are obligated to do so.

~ Dr. Marc Bekoff,
PhD - Animal Behavior

Dogs must be happy in order to learn, pay attention and problem solve.

~ Dr. Simon Gadbois,
PhD - Animal Behavior



You will notice that biological needs must be met, followed by security, bonding, do no harm training, and finally that top piece.....choice. Choice is a basic need for every living creature on earth. When you take away choices you are always met with resistance. Removal of choice is the single leading cause of conflict, both in the animal world and human world. Your average POW or prisoner has very few choices. We consider it extremely punitive to remove choice and be instructed as to when we can wake, sleep, eat, drink, or even go outside.

Our dogs are restricted on every level of their existence and finding ways to add back in choices so that they can drive their own experience when possible is advisable. Often owners run into trouble when they think their dog should act with robotic like precision and jump when their "masters" ask. They do things **TO** dogs instead of taking into consideration their need for autonomy and choice and gaining their cooperation.

Choice

Expecting any sentient creature to give up their autonomy and freedom of choice for the sake of another is not natural. It is setting unrealistic expectations on dogs that we don't even ask of ourselves.

Ways We Can Give Our Dogs Choices

Let them drive the walk. I often put my dogs on a long line and let them dictate where we will go once we get to a hike or pathway. As long as the dog doesn't pull, I am inclined to follow them anywhere that isn't dangerous. Every walk is about give and take. Expecting dogs to walk with robotic like precision is not a lot of fun for either of you.

Grooming / Handling. Giving dogs choices when it comes to when, where and how they are groomed as well as the ability to tell us when they have had enough is excellent husbandry. Cooperative care is one of the most important areas of training and is fairly new. But giving dogs the ability to walk away when they need a break and build up to a trusting, cooperative experience is only fair.

Food. Just like children, not all dog like all foods. Finding a variety of foods that they love to eat and is good for them is important. There is very real links between gut health and behaviour, so careful research is critical for food choices. Most companies have sample sizes and giving your dog a variety means that they will remain interested in their food and are getting a myriad of amino acid profiles to ensure their health.

Play. Allowing dogs to play in ways that they find appealing is obvious and critical to their wellbeing. Many people assume their dogs should like certain activities and force their dog into them. Some dogs do very well one on one with a dog and hate playing in large groups. This doesn't make your dog strange or abnormal. This is just their personal preference. If your dog balks at going to daycare or with a group dog walker, think about what your dog would find more appealing and enroll them with a dog walker who does enrichment walks or one or two dogs at a time. If your dog doesn't fetch, but loves flirt pole or herding games like treibball, why force fetch?

Whether to engage in touch or greetings. We all know of people that don't want hugs, children who don't want to sit on Santa's lap, or even times when we don't want to be manhandled, touched or even engaged in conversation. Learning when our dogs do not wish for petting, do not wish to engage someone or even preference for touch is important. Many of my clients call me when their dogs have become so aversive to touch that even coming at them with outstretched hands elicits a growl or snap. Most often little dogs become very adverse to touch and being handled as they are often picked up, against their will, and dragged from place to place, often away from the things they wished to do. If people would learn to call their dogs away and even targeting cues to move dogs through space without physical coercion they would all be better off.

Where to sleep. Often dogs preferences will change depending on the time of year and the owners sleep habits. Some dogs love sleeping in the bed, some on the floor or even en-suite where it is cool, some in their kennels where they feel more secure. It depends on each individual dog.

Choices in our lives provide us with a feeling of security and control. No living beings should feel helpless over their lives. See how offering your dogs choices can improve their happiness. I don't think you will be disappointed.