

What's next, "The Gun Whisperer"? We need better role models for our children.

by John D Visconti, CPDT-KA

*John Visconti, CPDT-KA owner of **Rising Star Dog Training**, is a certified professional dog trainer coaching dog owners on Long Island. John is a low risk, positive reinforcement trainer. His column "Of Dogs and Men" appears in the "Chronicle of the Dog" training magazine. John is a former chair for the Association of Pet Dog Trainers. He is also certified by AKC/CGC and DogGoneSafe (teaching safe interactions between children and dogs). He is a proud member of Jean Donaldson's Academy for Dog Trainers. His "Rescue Reporter" column appears on LIDogDirectory.com John can be reached at john@risingstardogtraining.com.*

I am looking forward to the premier broadcast of a new TV show called "The Gun Whisperer" during which a self-proclaimed firearms expert twirls a loaded hand gun, points it at his head and then attempts to balance it on his nose while standing on one leg; fun viewing for the entire family.

Too crazy to believe? Read what follows; I don't see much difference.

During a recent "Dog Whisperer" TV episode, "Showdown with Holly", the show's trainer engaged in repeated provocative behavior with Holly, a Labrador Retriever. The dog consistently tried to avoid confrontation but eventually, the trainer elicited an aggressive response from her.

In the course of the show, the trainer practiced nearly every behavior children should be taught to avoid when interacting with a dog. He also ignored repeated canine distress warning signals which all children should be taught to recognize and respect.

I am not going to address the training techniques utilized by this trainer, as I can't identify any. I am instead going to focus on how potentially dangerous his actions are for children who often mimic what they see on TV.

Children may attempt to mimic stunts seen on TV. Kids have been injured trying to repeat dangerous stunts they have seen on television shows. University of Michigan, Children and TV

Television can be a powerful influence in developing value systems and shaping behavior. Hundreds of studies of the effects of TV found that children may: imitate the violence they observe on television; and identify with certain characters, victims and/or victimizers.
American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry.

"Social learning theory may be a good place to start when trying to understand behaviors which imitate something that has already happened. The theory suggests that individuals, particularly kids, learn new behaviors quite easily by observing them." Jeffrey Brown, department of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and McLean Hospital.

As a society, we try to be mindful of the negative influence TV, movies, advertisements, etc. can have on our children.

The Motion Picture Association utilizes a rating system.

Cigarette ads were banned in 1970. In fact, RJ Reynolds Co. discontinued the use of their cigarette smoking, Joe Camel icon because of accusations that it influenced children to smoke.

The Dog Whisperer TV show occasionally flashes a warning (which is of next to no use for children) advising viewers not to practice what they are seeing on the show (an admission that the methods are dangerous?)

At the end of this article are screen captures from the show, "Showdown with Holly" You can decide for yourself if you want your child to mimic what is shown here. Every behavior captured flies directly in the face of what safety minded organizations teach people and more specifically children, about how to interact with dogs.

Immediately after being bitten, the trainer commented "I didn't see that coming" He missed every warning sign, was unaware of how provocative his behavior was and yet he's presented as an expert. Additionally, by stating that he didn't see the bite coming, he's disconnecting himself and his viewers from all the signals the dog provided, as if those signals, the very ones children need to recognize, were not a precursor to the dog biting. The one lesson that could have been learned by viewers, *don't do this or you'll be bitten*, is erased by the trainer when he renders all the warning signs meaningless by stating, "I didn't see that coming" Implied is, if the expert didn't see anything, I guess there were no warning signs provided by the dog.

This trainer's claim to fame is that he "rehabilitates dogs and trains people"

In "Show Down with Holly", I don't see any attempt to rehabilitate the dog and the training of people is only effective if he is attempting to show people what *not* to do.

Because a "don't try this" disclaimer is periodically flashed during the show, this does not discharge its responsibility for how harmful the behaviors of the trainer can be if imitated by others, especially children.

It's time this show goes the way of Joe Camel



Don't stare at a dog



Don't stand over a dog (especially while the dog is eating)



This frame occurs after the trainer puts his hands in the dog's food bowl, clearly something we teach children not to do. The dog responded by snarling. In these situations we teach children to stand straight, look down, ball their hands so their fingers aren't extended and to tuck their arms into their body. Note: above the trainer is leaning forward, fixing a stare at the dog, arms extending, hands open.



Here the trainer points at the dog. Something we also teach children not to do.



The dog is fixing a stare with a sideways glance. This is a powerful warning sign that the dog is upset. Children should be taught to identify this and back off



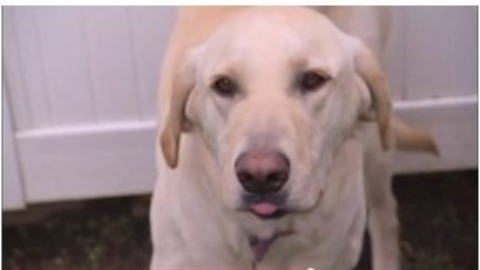
Here we see the trainer ignore the sign and extend his hand toward the dog.



Not surprisingly, the trainer is bitten.



He responds by kicking the dog in the chest.



Immediately after, the dog provides another distress signal that we teach children is a warning



Instead of respecting the dog's communication, the trainer stands over the dog as she is backed against a fence.

