

Book Review: *Cesar's Way*, by Cesar Millan.

Cesar's Way: Definitely NOT a Whisper

By Kathy Meyer, VMD

Although the jacket claims that the book offers a “natural, everyday guide to understanding & correcting common dog problems,” *Cesar's Way*, by Cesar Millan (aka the *Dog Whisperer*) delivers very little usable information for dog owners. The book is aptly named, as its main focus is Cesar, not the dogs. Instead of providing revolutionary insight into dog psyche, *Cesar's Way* largely describes Cesar's own interpretation of various problem dog behaviors and his methods of treating. The typical dog owner can't use these methods, as they involve 4 or 5 hours of vigorous exercise a day, time with a pack of 40 to 50 dogs, and physical corrections and intimidation to achieve submission. Cesar's various and sometimes peculiar philosophies and beliefs are woven throughout the book, making it more a treatise on his views of how dogs and owners (and even men and women) should construct their relationships rather than a useful guidebook to promote a harmonious life for dog and owner.

The most glaring faults of the book are not so much what is included, but what is not. First, there is no acknowledgement of the dog's ability to quickly and easily learn dozens of words to create a common vocabulary between dog and owner. This is otherwise known as training...something that has been very helpful over the thousands of years of human/dog interactions. Communication in this way has allowed dogs to be trained for very complex, useful behaviors in their complex lives as 21st century pets in a developed country. Cesar, however, strives for a “primal” relationship between dogs and their owners, epitomized in his view by homeless people and their dogs. In this primitive construct, Cesar uses no words to communicate with his dogs. Instead, the only sound he will issue is a harsh hiss, which will generally cause dogs to display submission when he is displeased. So, instead of teaching a dog to sit or down/stay and then asking the dog to remain calm so it can “earn” its dinner, Cesar expects the dog to just “figure it out,” regardless of how confused, hungry, and frustrated the dog becomes. Likewise, the poor fearful dogs Cesar “rehabilitates” could be easily taught to sit and stay while desensitized to his approach rather than being subjected to forceful, terrifying intimidation tactics described in the book. Cesar states that he will repeat these techniques “a thousand times” if necessary with fearful dogs.

Also related to training, or lack thereof, is Cesar's method of “discipline.” The book doesn't specifically advise owners on how to stop their dogs from doing what Cesar feels should be forbidden. Other than taking the dog on long marches on the end of a short lead with a noose around the most sensitive area of the neck and projecting calm, assertive energy, the reader is at a loss as to how he or she is to change her dog's behavior. Based on his “Dog Whisperer Show,” the method of discipline appears to involve punishment delivered verbally (his “hiss”) or through tightening of the choke collar to the point of shutting off the airway. Cesar does discuss the “alpha roll,” in his book, but wisely cautions owners from doing it on their own dogs except under the

guidance of a trained professional. I suspect the advantage to this is that the trainer will end up in the emergency room rather than the owner. The purpose of discipline is to educate the dog, and the approaches alluded to in this book do not instruct the owner to show the dog what the owner would like him or her to do instead of the undesirable behavior.

In addition to the above-mentioned omissions, there are no recommendations made for simple environmental manipulations that could minimize or even solve many problems. For example, Cesar mentioned a dog that bit mail carriers to the point that the USPS would not deliver mail for the entire neighborhood. This case was featured on a *Dog Whisperer* episode, which I did review. Not once did Cesar advise the owner to keep her dog under control by not allowing it to run at large, unsupervised, in the neighborhood. Although Cesar's appearance dressed up in a postal uniform was perfect TV schmaltz, it's unlikely this one-time encounter will affect that dog's future behavior toward the real mail carriers. Another case described in the book involved a dog that walked in perfect submission, unleashed down a city street to its owner's photography studio. However, at the studio, the dog began to display aggression toward clients. Cesar dramatically described the horrible outcomes, including euthanasia, if this behavior could not be stopped! However, he did not mention simply leaving the dog at home or using a leash, gate, or crate at the studio until adequate training could be achieved. More to the point, he didn't even describe how the owner was to stop behavior. Cesar simply advised him to act like a leader. Sadly, Cesar not only missed opportunities to easily direct the reader to successful strategies, but glamorized the walking of a dog off-lead in a busy city, which is unlawful in many jurisdictions and could prove fatal for a dog.

While Cesar's opening autobiography in the book provides a touching "rags to riches" story, it is of no particular help to the dog owner. However, it does provide great insight into Cesar's perception of the perfect life for a dog. His ideas were clearly formed during his childhood, where he observed the behavior his grandfather's nearly feral farm dogs. The dogs lived outdoors, were not regularly fed, and received no health care, save hosing for severe infestation of external parasites. The dogs were not trained, but just "naturally" knew what to do. This construct of the perfect life for a dog reappears later in the book, when Cesar declares that the happiest dogs in America are those owned by homeless people, as they engage in the proper following behavior required of all dogs if they view their owners as "dominant".

As Cesar goes on to describe various types of aggression he treats, he uses terms such as "unbalanced" and "negative energy." These vague terms do little to help advance our understanding or aid owners in preventing or treating problems. His rehabilitation techniques, while interesting, are simply descriptions of what he, himself, does at his facility. In general, it involves heavy exercise to induce a "calm, submissive state," exposure to the pack of dogs, and a feeding process where only the calmest dogs are given their food. As previously noted, these techniques do not easily transfer to the typical dog owner.

Throughout the book, much is made of popular “dominance theory” and its application to dog training. Cesar maintains that a dog that jumps up during greeting, pulls on a leash, or walks through the door first is dominating the owner. These assertions are patently false. Many dogs jump during greeting while displaying obvious submissive behaviors. They are whining and licking! The reason they jump is to sniff the owner’s face, which is simply vertically oriented rather than horizontally oriented, like other dogs. Likewise, pulling on the lead or going through the door first usually relates to a simple lack of training and the dog’s ability to move much faster than its human companion. Cesar’s description of wolf pack behavior is not supported by the latest research. There is no constant scrabbling to be top wolf. The pack structure is simply a family, with mother and father at the top and several years’ worth of maturing offspring. Placement in the hierarchy is based on sex and age.

In the final section of the book, Cesar offers up the closest thing to advice for owners in the book. I do agree with many of his questions prospective owners should ask themselves prior to taking on a puppy. However, while I agree exercise is important, his recommendations for exercise in excess of 1.5 hours of walking per day, are not practical for most people. I am particularly concerned about the potential for injuries to dogs worked out on the treadmill, and joint damage to dogs under the age of two who may be asked to wear a backpack full of filled water bottles, as he suggests. Under the discipline section, Cesar repeatedly will advise owners what not to let their dogs do, such as wake them up in the morning or greet them too enthusiastically upon their return. As noted above, he doesn’t tell owners how to stop the behavior or what alternate behavior the dog should be taught! The most concrete advice I could find was for owners to always behave in a calm assertive way. I do endorse this concept but it would be much more helpful for Cesar to instruct readers on exactly what they should do with the dog while being calm and assertive.

“Cesar’s Way” will make a fine read for you if you want to learn about Cesar and how he claims to dramatically rehabilitates dogs to live in his pack. His is an impressive story of human ambition and resolve, which makes a nice marketing package for simplistic, outdated, and sometimes downright dangerous techniques. However, if you are a dog owner looking to deepen your relationship with your dog and/or improve your dog’s behavior, I would direct you to authors such as Patricia McConnell, Jean Donaldson, Ian Dunbar, and Sophia Yin. By using more advanced, humane techniques of true dog training, you will surely improve the quality of life for both you and your dog. And the book won’t be centered on the messenger; it will be centered on the message.