

“If You Can’t Say Anything Nice ...”

I just Googled something I used to hear from my parents: “If you can’t say anything nice, don’t say anything at all.” I was amazed to find nearly 500,000 entries, so it seems that adage is alive and well. Certainly it is good to be positive with other people, but there are instances when it is not always possible or desirable to keep silent about negative things. There are times when we need to say things to each other—and to our clients—that are not completely “nice.” Canine professionals very often find themselves in a teaching role with their clients. As such, we sometimes need to correct clients’ misperceptions or misunderstandings of their dogs. Other times, we need to find ways to pry them away from their devotion to dominance-oriented trainers or celebrities. There are yet other times when we have to show clients that their current methods or behaviors are unproductive and possibly causing pain or unnecessary stress for their dogs.

Those of us who are dedicated to the use of non-aversive dog training methods often find ourselves facing clients who are wedded to the use of outdated and painful devices such as prong and shock collars or methods such as pinching ears and rolling dogs onto their backs, and before we know it, the fuse has been lit! Because we are passionate about what we do and deeply concerned about the dogs whose lives are entrusted to us, we sometimes feel compelled to correct that maddening state of affairs immediately. While passion and concern are good things overall, they can also get us into trouble. If we spout off too quickly about how “wrong” the client is for using said devices and methods, we might be indelicate about it and offend the client. While you might respond by thinking, “Fine! I don’t want to work with anyone who is using such methods and they need to know right now where I stand on this,” the upshot of quickly-spoken criticisms or ultimatums often is the loss of that client. Again, you might think that this is fine because it would not have worked out anyway with that client, but here is where I wish (respectfully) to differ with that line of reasoning.

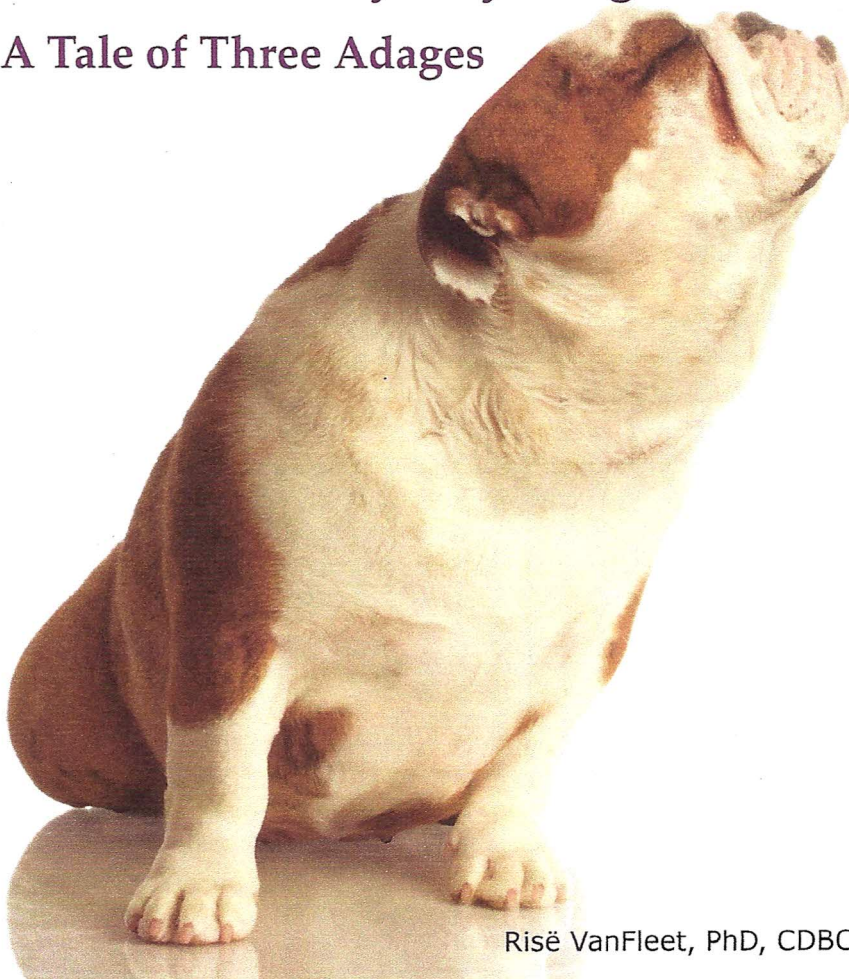
I have faced this same situation many times in my play therapy work with maltreated children. If the protective service system decides that these children will be returned to their parents (usually after the parents have met certain criteria established by the court), I often end up working with those parents to try to create change in that family for the betterment of the children and the parents. While

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I could certainly entertain very negative thoughts and attitudes toward the parents, this approach is not likely to benefit anyone. If the parents are there with me, I have an opportunity. They are sitting in my office for any number of reasons, but whatever their motivation, I have an opportunity to help change things. If I tell them how horrible it is that they maltreated their child (even if that is true), it is likely that they will go somewhere else or skip therapy entirely and I will lose that opportunity. I have confidence that I have the skills to help them move to a better place, so I don’t want that to happen. (There ARE times when I won’t work with some parents because they have not done the required preliminary work, but most of the time when I face this situation, the parents are at least minimally motivated to work to get their children back, and it becomes my task to help increase that motivation.) I might add that even with less serious family situations, I sometimes learn that parents are spanking their children or using inappropriate punishments, and the same line of reasoning applies—I need to keep them coming back if I am going to help change the situation. This does not mean that I ignore the problem—we talk about it and then focus on how to prevent its recurrence. *[continued on next page]*

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A Tale of Three Adages



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