

## My Parenting Experiment with The Dog Whisperer

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In the Sunday Styles section of *The New York Times*, Alex Williams recently wrote in his article, ["Becoming the Alpha Dog in Your Own Home"](#), about how some parents have begun to apply the lessons from the television show *The Dog Whisperer* to disciplining their children. [Cesar Millan](#), otherwise known as the Dog Whisperer teaches the "alpha dog" owner-in-charge theory: set clear boundaries and hierarchies in the home. No negotiating or persuading, just simple well-meaning rules strictly enforced is what's needed to bring peace and discipline to your dog, or perhaps your child.

Without intending to, I gave this alpha dog trick a try, on my one and a half year old son Blake. He fell and injured his mouth last week. The cuts would heal fine, but the doctor indicated that Blake should not put anything other than soft food in his mouth for two days. A hard food or object would risk re-opening the wound.

My son loves to put things in his mouth. It's practically his favorite habit. Pick up an object, feel it, taste it and on to the next one. In the past I had told him "take that toy out of your mouth," "we don't eat phones, we eat food," "don't put your mouth on the air conditioning unit," "get away from the shoes!" Blake would smile and think we were playing a game. He would run away with the object or put it down, only to happily put something else in his mouth. I hoped he would grow out of the habit on his own since my disciplining didn't make much difference.

But now that the doctor commanded that I extinguish the mouth habit for two days or risk another injury to my son's mouth, I had a new confidence in the "not in the mouth" rule, born out of the necessity of protecting my child from himself. And this outlook subconsciously affected how I disciplined.

My husband or I were within two feet of my son for two days (except when he was in his crib). As soon as one of us saw an object approach his mouth, we'd impulsively exclaim "No!" and grab it away from him. I did this at least a dozen times and so did my husband. My son did not think it was a game. By the end of the second day he barely put anything in his mouth



The unintended experiment worked. When I behaved like an alpha dog, with complete authority and confidence, I succeeded in enforcing the "no mouth" rule.

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A few days later I had an epiphany: before the mouth injury, I had wanted to believe that I was doing all I could to prevent my son from putting things in his mouth. But now I realize that was a cop-out. It was easy to yell orders from across the room and a lot harder to get on the floor next to my son, be on alert and remove objects every single time he put one to his lips. Like many other aspects of parenting, discipline requires hard work. Perhaps that's the underlying lesson from The Dog Whisperer.

***Are you the alpha dog in your home? Are you afraid to be a strong disciplinarian? Is it wrong to apply dog training to child discipline? Do you and your partner agree on how to discipline your child?***