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Punishment: Is It Useful for Changing Behavior?

I have many clients come into the clinic who have used punishment-based techniques to change a pet’s unwanted behaviors. The problems, however, still exist or are worse. What is happening?

Dog training has recently become the focus of very popular television reality shows featuring all sorts of techniques guaranteed to quickly correct problem behaviors. Many are punishment-based and rely on quick reflexes and good timing of the personality that uses them. In actuality, while punishment can work, changing behavior using only punishment is very difficult.

Punishment is the application of something aversive that makes the targeted behavior decrease or stop. With positive punishment, an aversive action, such as a jerk on a choke chain, is applied. With negative punishment, something the dog wants, such as your company, is taken away. This certainly seems straightforward enough, but often the behavior does not diminish in frequency, let alone stop. What has happened when this occurs?

1. The incorrect punishment may have been applied—in other words, the individual receiving the punishment did not see it as punishment. For example, a dog is barking to come inside; you open the door and yell at the dog but let it inside anyway. Since the dog got to come inside, it probably did not perceive that any punishment had occurred. As a result, it will most certainly bark when it wants to come inside at another time.



2. The punishment may have been administered at the wrong time. This occurs when an owner comes home and finds trash all over the floor. The owner drags the dog over to the mess, yells at the dog, and perhaps spansks the dog. The behavior that the owner wants to stop is getting into the trash can. However, since that act has occurred quite some time ago, the dog does not recognize getting into the trash can as the punished act. In addition, unless the punishment (or reward, for that matter) is applied within 1

to 5 seconds, the animal probably does not know what behavior is being punished or rewarded.¹

3. If the pet was engaged in many behaviors at the time that the punishment was applied, it may have been unclear which behavior was being targeted. This may happen when a dog is barking, growling, and running back and forth in front of a fence, door, or window. While the

continues

owner is yelling at the dog or grabbing it by the collar, it is probably not clear to the dog which behavior should stop. In fact, all the yelling, grabbing, and excitement probably increases the arousal level rather than decreases it—the dog perceives that something terrible is happening and becomes more agitated rather than calmer. Animals that are highly emotionally aroused are usually unlikely to learn anything new.

4. The desire to engage in the behavior may be stronger than the desire to avoid or stop the punishment. This can happen if a dog is very anxious, fearful, or agitated and simply wants the stimulus to leave. The pet's desire to get rid of the stimulus is greater than the desire to listen to the owner or avoid punishment. As a result, the pet persists in the behavior.

5. Punishment tells the pet what not to do but does not usually give information about what to do. Most dogs engaged in a behavior have chosen that behavior because they think it is the appropriate response at the time. They are not necessarily inclined to pick a different behavior unless one has been taught. Often, they will choose another behavior only if the underlying emotion behind the original behavior has been changed. And if their behavior results in the outcome they desire, they will repeat the behavior, perhaps despite being punished again.

6. It is easy to mistake a lack of response as learning not to engage in a certain behavior. When a severe punishment is applied, the animal may be so frightened that it inhibits all behavior that it is doing at the time. This does not mean that the animal has learned not to perform the behavior that was supposedly targeted with punishment. Rather, it may simply be a phenomenon called *learned helplessness*.² Instead of the animal learning not to engage in a certain behavior, the animal opts to do nothing; because no matter what the animal does, the outcome is unpleasant or uncertain. A good example of this is a dog that appears to be fine at veterinary visits when forcefully restrained yet

on the next visit cannot be contained. The pet may have perceived the forceful restraint as punishment and simply stopped reacting, but has learned to avoid that circumstance in the future by increasing rather than decreasing resistance.

7. Finally, the application of punishment has the very real possibility of creating fear, anxiety, and defensive aggression. Not only are fear and anxiety unwanted emotions in our pets, but the resulting defensive aggression can result in injury, damage the human–animal bond, and perhaps cause the pet to lose its life. I recently had a patient that was treated as a young dog (1 year old) with a shock collar for jumping on people who came to the home. At clinical presentation, the dog was very anxious and fearful of many things, and when people came in the door, the dog would crouch down, growl, and run away. No jumping occurred, but is that the behavior we want from our pets?

As you can see, punishment is actually very difficult to use correctly. When used incorrectly, it can have unintended consequences. So, back to the original question: Can punishment ever be used to change a behavior? According to scores of psychology papers, the answer is yes, but the parameters that must be met to avoid all the other potential problems are numerous. Therefore, it is always better to teach what you want than to punish what you don't want. We can set up our pets to succeed and show them what we want them to do. In the long run, everyone wins.

For more information on the use of punishment and other important behavioral topics, consult the position papers on the American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior Web site, avsabonline.org/avsabonline. ■

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