



Using Punishments in Dog Behavior Modification

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What is punishment?

The word punishment evokes all kinds of emotions and opinions. There are a variety of techniques and “schools of thought” with regard to the use of punishment in resolving behavior problems in dogs. This article is not meant to address techniques or methodology, but rather to address punishment as a scientific term and its use in behavior modification. Punishment is defined as a consequence that when applied following a behavior, reduces that behavior. There are two “types” of punishment – one where something bad happens and one where something good stops. Both of these types of punishment are aimed at reducing an unwanted behavior. The thing we struggle with the most is the type and intensity of the punishment needed to affect behavior.

As seen on TV

Television programs offer much information to the dog owning public about how to resolve problems. We see everything from using treats and toys to scruffing and pinning a dog. The problem is that these programs rarely show what doesn't work, nor do they show the potential side effects of the various techniques that arise following the taping of the show. When seeing follow up cases, we only see the successful cases. We never see what to do if the suggested technique doesn't work. Finally, these shows are abbreviated versions of systematic protocols which should be tailored specifically to each case and modified as necessary as the situation evolves.

One size does not fit all

I think we could all agree that repeatedly punching a dog for reacting inappropriately toward a guest or another dog would be an abusive method of attempting to modify behavior. Further, gently scolding the dog in a sing-song voice is unlikely to be effective for most dogs. My point is that there are so many ways to handle things that we need to go back to basics. I always think about the child's story, Goldilocks and the Three Bears, when referring to the intensity of punishment. The porridge cannot be too hot or too cold – it must be just right. The punishment cannot be too harsh or too mild – it must be just right. But who determines if a punishment is too harsh or too mild? The trainer or behavior expert, the owner, the television show or book, etc.? None of these! The determination needs to be according to the dog with which we are working. For some dogs a stern yell would be devastating where another dog could interpret a swat on the hindquarters as affection. Unfortunately, I see pet owners trying to follow the advice they receive from their friends, family, television shows, and books. More often than not, these techniques are inappropriate for their situation. Further, pet owners are not trained in how to evaluate the effectiveness of these techniques nor are they trained in the proper administration of these techniques. This often leaves me, as a practitioner, with a dog that has either become sensitized or desensitized to consequences. That makes the issue far more challenging to resolve.

Why is the behavior occurring?

Generally, pet owners either fail to look at the motivation of the behavior before reacting to it or they make erroneous assumptions about the motivation of the behavior. Let's make it even simpler – instead of trying to come up with a motivation – let's look at what makes the behavior work or continue. Here is a simple example: Let's imagine a dog that as a 6-month-old used to tuck his tail and hide behind his owner when people or other dogs would approach. Now he is 18 months old and he isn't tucking his tail anymore. Now he is growling as they approach and lunging as they pass. If you just met the dog without knowing the history – you may not be able to tell that the motivation of the behavior is still fear. On the surface, it may look like a dog trying to be “dominant” by aggressing. Regardless of the motivation – what makes the lunging persist? What is the dog trying to accomplish by lunging? Think simply -- space and distance from the target! From the dog's perspective the behavior works because people and their dogs don't stick around after the growl and lunge. Either the dogs and people keep walking farther away or the lunging dog is taken away as quickly as possible. Either way the dog gets what he wants – space! In order to change the behavior we have to make that not work for the dog by changing the outcome when the dog engages in that behavior. (This is known as operant conditioning.) The dog would need to find that he isn't able to chase people away and that his behavior doesn't give him the distance he wants most. If he is not getting the outcome he is expecting, then the inappropriate behavior is no longer reinforcing for the dog. That paves the way for new, more appropriate sequences to teach the dog!

Feedback to the dog

It is said that dogs like to please their owners. This is because dogs love the feedback that they receive from their owners when their owners are happy. Dogs tend to do more of whatever earns our affection. (In terms of learning theory, affection acts as a reinforcement.) In contrast, punishments don't make dogs happy. Generally dogs don't want to be at odds with us since that interrupts the symbiosis of the bonded, social relationship.

Emotional stress: anger and frustration

Most punishments are all too often merely an expression of our own anger and frustration with the situation. We react emotionally instead of remaining emotionally detached and responding decisively. The last thing the dog needs is to have us respond to an already emotional situation for them with more strong emotion! Yelling, yanking, pinning, and other related techniques generally cause stress and anxiety for both the dog and the owner. Increasing a dog's emotional stress never helps. Like people, dogs don't think rationally when they are stressed and emotional. We have to help them to be less emotional and to weigh out their options with our guidance. Often we should choose a consequence that is more frustrating than harsh. Appropriately created frustration of an appropriate intensity brings about problem solving and creative thinking. Here is an example to which we can all relate: When we are faced with a road closure on our route to work – we have to find a way around it and will be likely to choose that route for as long as the road is blocked. The road closure creates frustration, but creative thinking and problem solving reduce that frustration because we have found another route that works better. Dogs need to learn that their current (inappropriate) way of reacting no longer works. This will require owners to have patience, consistency, repeated practice, and guidance

for a more appropriate behavior (i.e., a new route to work). Dogs need to rule out their existing behavior and find a new way to respond.

Superstitions

Another consideration is the creation of superstitions, which occurs when a dog learns the wrong aspect of what we are trying to teach them. If the fearful dog described above is scruffed and pinned to the ground for growling and lunging at approaching people and dogs – what sort of superstition could be created? From the dog's perspective, bad things happen or mom/dad is really upset when people and/or dogs approach, so the need to create distance increases!! The dog may learn that the approach predicts even worse things so create distance sooner and with more intensity.

Suppression or resolution?

Finally, harsh punishment may cause an immediate cessation of a behavior. Often times, this immediate cessation is merely a temporary suppression of that behavior. It is like getting a speeding ticket. There is nothing like a \$150 fine to temporarily reform a speeder, but after a few weeks he/she is right back to speeding again. With dog behavior modification – we need to address the whole picture – what is the dog getting from the current behavior and what do we want him to do instead? Without both aspects of behavior modification – we rarely obtain a long term solution. The dog needs to rethink the entire scenario with our guidance and become practiced in the new sequence so that becomes his new default or automatic response.

Measuring success

Finally, effectiveness must be measured in terms of the frequency, duration, and/or intensity of the behavior we are trying to change. We need to see that we are getting progressively less of that behavior now as well as in the future. We also need to ensure that we have yielded a calmer, more confident dog that is no longer emotional or stressed in those situations.

There is so much to consider when using punishment that it is critical to seek the help of a professional who possesses the education and experience to consider all possible outcomes and create an effective protocol for a long term solution. A credentialed professional should be able to advise you as to a proper protocol with consequences that are appropriate for your dog, the situation, and your family. Please contact us for more information: info@petbehaviorsolutions.com or 602-324-8948.