

THE PITFALLS OF PUNISHMENT



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INTRODUCTION

WHAT IS PUNISHMENT?

Dog professionals often talk about positive and negative punishment which makes it seem that one is good and one is bad, but actually positive means something is added and negative means something is taken away.

Examples of positive punishment (where bad things begin) are pain, noise, shock, verbal reprimand, lead correction and negative (where good things end) are removing a toy, removing attention, or timeouts.

Living with a dog can bring so much pleasure, but there will be times when things aren't going as expected. Behaviours may arise that we find challenging or upsetting.

It can be easy to find ourselves shouting "no" or "stop it" or jerking on the lead to correct behaviour.

Correcting behaviour is so often the first thing we do due to our own frustration, not knowing what we need to do or misinformation on why our dog is behaving a certain way.

However, using punishment has many risks and side effects.

We will be exploring the 10 reasons why we should avoid using punishment as a way of training your dog.





PUNISHMENT WILL NOT CHANGE THE UNDERLYING EMOTIONAL RESPONSE

#1

Let's take punishing a growl as an example...

Have you ever heard somebody say, "the dog bit with no warning?"

Sometimes dogs won't show many warning signals before reacting and one of the reasons for this could be that they have learnt these signals don't help them.

This can happen because warning signals, like growling, have been punished. Not only were the signals not listened to, but the situation becomes worse for the dog because punishment was used.

This can suppress the warning signals while leaving intact the emotional state of discomfort or anxiety that the dog feels.

Punishing your dog's growl or any warning behaviour is not only unfair on the dog, but it can lead to dangerous situations where people no longer receive signals from their dog before a bite occurs.

Punishing behaviour that reflects an emotional state of discomfort or high level of stress may make your dog's anxiety even worse, leaving you and your dog in a vicious cycle with no relief.



WHAT IS YOUR DOG TRYING TO SAY?

PUNISHMENT DOESN'T TELL YOUR DOG WHAT TO DO INSTEAD

#2

For example, if your dog tends to bark at other dogs when you pass them on a lead and you don't want them to, you might be tempted to jerk on the lead to punish the behaviour.

This might work to suppress the behaviour in that moment, but it doesn't help your dog figure out what you would like them to do instead.

If the goal is for your dog not to lunge at people or bark at other dogs, the best course of action is to think of something that's incompatible and teach them to do that behaviour instead.

You could get them to sniff the ground in search of treats or look at you for support and information on what to do next.

Taking a proactive approach will not only result in your dog not barking or lunging but will help them choose an alternative behaviour that supports their emotional wellbeing.

So always think, "what do I want my dog to do instead?"

WHAT DO YOU REALLY WANT YOUR DOG TO DO?





PUNISHMENT CAN CAUSE CONFUSION FOR YOUR DOG

#3

Dogs always behave in ways which work for them. Often natural dog behaviour isn't wrong or bad if you're a dog, but it can be undesirable for humans.

Dogs don't inherently know what we would like them to do and are simply doing what they know works. Sometimes that means they do things we'd rather they didn't.

You might come home to find your dog has chewed something important or raided the rubbish. Perfectly natural behaviour, but an undesirable outlet!

Delayed punishment after the behaviour has taken place will cause your dog to become confused.

They don't understand why you are angry or frustrated, but may try to appease you by displaying body language such as looking away, pinning their ears back or tucking their tail.

Have you seen pictures of dogs apparently looking "guilty" while wearing signs that read, "I ate my mum's shoes?"

The look isn't guilt, but a reaction to your behaviour and body language at that exact moment in time. Your dog isn't able to connect the dots to a behaviour they did whilst alone with how you are behaving now.



DOGS LIVE IN THE MOMENT

PUNISHMENT CAN CREATE MORE TRIGGERS FOR YOUR DOG

#4

Punishment may end up creating additional triggers for your dog.

Dogs are constantly making associations and learning what is safe and what isn't. This continuous appraisal of the world around them means that if they are experiencing fear, pain or any other unpleasant sensations they may begin to associate this with something else in their environment.

When punishment occurs, dogs may see other things in the environment as the cause of the punishment. This can create a negative association and add to their list of triggers.

Let's look at the example of jerking the lead if a dog pulls towards another dog. In that moment the dog will experience pain while their focus is on the other dog.

This could lead to them associating pain and discomfort with the other dog appearing. If this occurs repeatedly, your dog may start to predict pain when they see other dogs.

This could cause them to over-react when they see dogs in an attempt to make them go away and avoid the pain.

ASSOCIATIONS ARE ALWAYS BEING MADE





THE OUTCOME IS NOT ALWAYS WHAT YOU EXPECT

#5

Sometimes trying to punish behaviour can backfire and lead to outcomes you weren't expecting.

Let's look at the example of shouting at your dog for barking at people passing.

You may believe that this will result in your dog not barking as much.....

However this isn't always the case..

Sometimes what happens is the dog realises when they bark at strangers, you will interact with them.

If your dog is seeking interaction with you then they may actually start to bark more at passers by because it leads to engagement with you.

So instead of decreasing the barking, you end up increasing it.

It's important to understand what is driving the behaviour we are seeing, because without that knowledge we may end up having the opposite effect to what we intend.

In this example, creating more opportunities for interaction with you as a result of desirable behaviour, could make all the difference.

WHAT'S DRIVING THE BEHAVIOUR?



OVER TIME YOU MAY FIND THE BEHAVIOUR ESCALATING

#6

Dogs can build up a tolerance to punishment. Trying to use punishment to stop behaviour requires that the punishment be harsh enough in that moment to immediately and effectively stop the behaviour that is happening.

Over time you may find that the same punishment is less effective at stopping the behaviour.

There is an underlying reason causing your dog to behave the way that they are. Without addressing it you may find your dog still chooses to act in the same way, despite knowing it results in punishment.

They can also build up a tolerance to the punishment, which then leads to harsher punishment being delivered to stop the behaviour.

This escalation can lead you to act in ways you never thought you would with your dog - seeking the relief that occurs when the undesirable behaviour stops.

In order to avoid this negative spiral, it's a good idea to explore more proactive ways to prevent the behaviour occurring rather than reacting when it does.

PUNISHMENT MAY BECOME LESS EFFECTIVE



FEAR OF PUNISHMENT CAN INCREASE REACTIVITY

#7

Punishment can lead to an increase in reactivity due to an increase in fear of the punishment. A dog who over-reacts towards strangers, other dogs, handling or anything else is likely to already be experiencing a strong emotional response to that situation.

Adding punishment into the scenario can cause additional stress.

Which may lead to them fearing not only the original trigger, but also the punishment that follows.

In these instances, dogs may start to display reactive behaviour earlier and with more intensity that they did previously.

They may react when they see a dog in the far distance when previously they only did when they were close.

This escalation can feel out of control, but when you realise dogs are responding to the things around them that cause them concern, we can help de-escalate the situation by supporting them, rather than adding to their stress and fear with punishment.

YOU WANT TO AVOID ESCALATING THE SITUATION



PUNISHMENT CAN LEAD TO AVOIDANCE BEHAVIOURS

8

Punishment can lead to your dog not coming when you call them.

Let's say your dog has a history of taking a while to come back to you. Perhaps you call them several times before they respond...

If you punish them when they eventually come back in the hope they will listen quicker next time, it may backfire.

Predicting that you will punish them when they come to you, they may be inclined to stay away in an attempt to avoid the punishment for as long as possible.

As dogs can't read your mind, they see that coming back resulted in punishment, not that it was the length of time taken that you were trying to punish.

If your dog does a behaviour you want, but is then punished for it, the likelihood of them repeating it decreases.

That is why it's so important to never punish your dog when they come to you - no matter how frustrated or scared you were when waiting for them.

Punishment can lead to longer term recall issues and also avoidance of you in the future.

PUNISHMENT CAN RUIN RECALL



PUNISHMENT HAS PHYSICAL SIDE EFFECTS

#9

Punishment has a physical effect on your body and that of your dog causing stress. Stress triggers the sympathetic nervous system, which is the fight or flight response, which leads to physical changes in the body.

Chronic or repeated stress can elevate cortisol levels leading to longer term problems. Cortisol inhibits the activity of serotonin, one of the "feel good" hormones.

This reduces sleep quality which can lead to more irritability.

It reduces the activity of the prefrontal cortex, which is the part of the brain responsible for rational thought which enables putting a brake on reactive responses.

Long term elevation of cortisol causes tissue damage to the hippocampus, which is the part of the brain responsible for managing memory and learning, so this can reduce the ability to learn and remember.

Physical corrections and physical punishment is painful for your dog.

Studies have shown that up to 80% of behavioural issues. are relate to pain.

LONG TERM STRESS CAN DAMAGE THE BRAIN





PUNISHMENT WILL IMPACT YOUR RELATIONSHIP

#10

Finally, and most importantly, punishment will impact the relationship you share with your dog. Every relationship should be built on trust and compassion.

Trust underpins everything - from helping your dog form new associations to teaching new behaviours.

You want your dog to feel they can turn to you for support when they need it.

Building a trusting relationship takes time, consistency and patience.

But it can all be undone if we choose to use punishment with our dogs.

If we truly want to resolve their behavioural issue and help them to become more confident in their environment, it is essential that we put time into the relationship we share.

Punishment can lead to dogs forming negative associations with us and learning that being around us feels unsafe.

If this occurs, it becomes increasingly difficult to build better associations as we become part of the cause.

TRUST IS ESSENTIAL

Reach out if you would like support with any behavioural issue

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