

Point Of View:

The Use of Electronic Remote Training Collars (Shock Collars) With Dogs

Electronic remote training devices (shock collars) allow a trainer/handler to remotely deliver an aversive stimulation (i.e., shock) to the dog in order to punish (suppress), a target behavior. There are three types of e-collars: pet containment systems, bark control collars, and training collars. The following discussion is focused on the third type of collar—the remote training collar.

Shock collars are a controversial topic in training circles. Shock collars have strong advocates and equally strong detractors. As with most things in life, the reality resides in the middle ground.

On the advocacy side of the debate:

- The design and manufacture of e-collars has improved dramatically in the past several years, resulting in equipment that has a greater range of electrical shock and distance, a vibrating (or paging) mode and optional audible tone cues/warnings.
- The broader range of stimulation settings enables handlers to find the “right” level of shock for each dog—one that it will respect, yet one that is not painful or fear-inducing.
- It is possible to utilize e-collars humanely, whereas past models were not reliable and could result in excessive or unintended shocks to the dog. In the hands of a skilled handler and with the appropriate dog, an e-collar can be an effective, humane training device for certain types of behavioral issues.

On the detraction side of the debate:

- Research has proven that electrical shock corrections cause a stress response in dogs, based on the cortisol levels in their saliva as well as heart rate. There are also behavioral observations of stress expressed through vocalizations and body language. The more intense the shock, the more pronounced the stress response.
- There are concerns over the handler using the e-collar in the proper manner (timing of correction, level of correction, context of correction, emotional use of correction) and for appropriate types of behaviors (standard obedience behaviors rather than behaviors based in fear, anxiety or aggression). These are no small concerns as research has determined that the learning (termed “avoidance learning”) that occurs with e-collars is long-lasting and is resistant to extinction or counter-conditioning.
- Another risk to be cognizant of is the creation of unintended associations where any coincidental stimuli present when the shock is administered can become a “discriminative stimulus” for punishment. It is not uncommon for a dog to associate their handler, a location, or a given context (collar on) with the aversive electrical shock, causing a fearful or aggressive response to that discriminative stimulus.

Regardless of the value judgment any individual assigns to e-collars, research has identified several universal truths of using e-collars:

- The electrical shock does create a stress response in dogs;
- Dogs will adapt and stress levels will normalize when electrical shock is used predictably so the dog understands that avoidance of the shock is within his control;
- Dogs are best able to predict and control the stressor (shock stimulus) when they can clearly associate the electrical shock with their action (i.e., touching prey versus random shocks);



- Unpredictable application of the shock at a high intensity over a period of time will cause dogs to exhibit learned helplessness;
- Dogs will habituate to electrical shock, rendering it ineffective, if the initial level is too low and the level is gradually increased;
- The challenge in using an e-collar is determining the “right” level of shock to use that does not cause fear or pain, yet is effective in delivering a corrective stimulus to the dog in the behavioral context;
- How the dog experiences the electrical shock will be affected by the dog’s previous experiences, dog’s level of excitement, frequency of application, location of the shock, thickness of hair and level of moisture on skin, making the precision of the device less objective than one might think.

My bottom line conclusion based on the research and experience of others is this:

- Shock collars are for corrections, plain and simple. They should not be used to train desirable behaviors (negative reinforcement).
- *Never* use a shock collar if the behavior to be corrected is rooted in fear, anxiety or aggression.
- *Never* use a shock collar to correct a dog less than one year old. (CCPDT Code of Ethics)
- Use the least aversive level of shock that the dog will respect and respond to (easier said than done).
- Be predictable in the use of the correction so the dog learns how to avoid the shock by exhibiting the behavior you desire.
- Make it clear for the dog what he is receiving the shock for—a direct connection to his behavior is most effective.
- If using shock to punish incorrect responses to cues, be sure the desired behavior is first trained reliably on cue through rewards-based training. Do not use the shock collar to train a behavior to start with. *Always* begin with positive reinforcement of desirable behaviors.
- Work with a qualified trainer to first reliably train the desirable behaviors, and then establish and institute a precise protocol for use of the shock collar.

This review of the pros and cons and realities of shock collars is intended to help the owner make the decision of whether or not to use the device with a full awareness of these pros and cons. For additional perspective on this important subject, please read this thorough and well-written blog post and included links: <http://www.squidoo.com/collars-shock>.