



Punishment in Dog Training is a Complicated Topic

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Punishing or correcting a dog has become very controversial. It seems that there are two opposing camps on this topic. On the one side, people believe that in order to be compassionate with dogs, punishment should not be used. On the other side, people say they are more old-school and believe that behavior has consequences and dogs must learn from those consequences. Then there is everyone in-between! This article delves into the science of memory, learning, and behavior in dogs to help strike a balance.

Understanding memory in dogs

Clients frequently ask if dogs can remember certain people or events after a period time and they are surprised when I say yes. Dogs have perfectly intact memories similar to ours. The problem is that they can't communicate with us about it in any way other than through their behavior.

Humans use language to move back and forth in time. We are able to communicate about the past, present, and future in a sentence or two and the listener completely understands what we are saying. Dogs, on the other hand, are unable to communicate with humans about anything other than in the present tense. We are only able to read a dog's current behavior.

Understanding behavior

Behavior is defined as a dog's actions at any given point in time. As a result, dogs think and recall information very differently than humans.

Temple Grandin, an Animal Behaviorist and an autism spokesperson, once said that dogs are more like autistic people. They think in terms of details instead of sequences. She went on to say that if a dog and a person were to observe a car crash, they would recall the information differently. People think in terms of who did what, when, and then what happened. Dogs would catch every detail in the picture they took in their mind. She goes on to say, "Since animals do not have verbal language, they have to store memories as pictures, sounds, or other sensory impressions. Sensory-based information by its very nature is more detailed than word-based memories. As a person with autism, all my thoughts are in photo-realistic pictures..."

That insight presents a very important clash in our learning style. Dogs learn based on sensory impressions in a very detailed world. Humans are rule followers and most of our learning is based on behavior chains that involve rules. (i.e., do this, don't do that, etc.) When we try to impose this "rule following" ability onto our dogs, we just plain get it wrong.

We can teach a child to look both ways before crossing the street but if a dog's ball rolls into the street, they don't stop and follow the rule to look both ways before crossing. Don't get me wrong, dogs have a natural hazard avoidance. It is possible that they may not cross if cars are coming, but it isn't because they followed the rule of looking both ways before crossing. It is because, for that dog, hazard avoidance was somehow activated in that scenario.

One shot learning

One shot learning occurs when a dog receives a correction or a punishment only one time. But to the dog, the intensity of the punishment caused an immediate suppression of many behaviors. Several of those behaviors were the targeted undesired behaviors so it looks like the correction was incredibly effective. One shot learning can occur with ANY punishment including but not limited to: reprimands or yelling; hitting or swatting; shock, vibrate, spray, or sound collars; leash corrections, startle noises, and so on. (i.e., anything that evokes fear or causes pain or discomfort.) In addition, this correction often makes the dog a bit calmer and a little more attentive to us. A triple bonus, right? Not exactly.

Often, we will hear a person tout their dog's intelligence because it took only one shock from a shock collar delivered for chasing the cat and he stopped immediately. Let's break that down. For there to be "one shot learning", there was only one occurrence made to create an association. We must remember how dogs learn differently than us. It is not because he learned the rule that chasing the cat is not nice and he is not allowed to do it. It is because the shock from the collar activated his hazard avoidance and created fear or caution which involves a general shut down of most behaviors that the dog is or was doing. The dog often engages in fewer behaviors, and he is cautious about the behavior choices he makes. It may even make him return to his humans for reassurance resulting from a dog's domesticated instinct to look to a human when in conflict. This gives us, the human, the impression that he understood the underlying rule involved in the lesson as we set out to teach it. In reality, this can go several different ways.

- Maybe the dog stopped due to fear and hazard avoidance thereby causing him to make more thought out choices. In the process, he figured out that not only do humans make their conflict better, but we also pile on the rewards when he STOPS doing the 'thing' we didn't want him to do. In this scenario, he decides that chasing the cat wasn't nearly as much fun as he thought in the first place.
- Another scenario could be that the dog stops chasing the cat for the next week but when the shock doesn't happen again and the fear or hazard avoidance lifts; he begins to engage in his choice of behaviors again, safely. Then he starts chasing the cat again which causes his owners to put the shock collar on again. Eventually, he learns that when the shock collar is on, hazard avoidance is activated, and it is best to do very little in order to stay safe. This has a side effect of keeping him from chasing the cat, so we are happy and take the shock collar off again. The sequence repeats itself and we conclude that he is doing this to get back at us because he knows it's wrong since he stops chasing the cat when the collar is on. This again, assumes that dogs can follow rules as a part of their learning.
- Another possibility is that the dog receives a shock for chasing after the cat and he learns that these shocks only happen when humans are around because the humans are a part of his picture. So, the dog stops chasing the cat completely when people are around with or without the shock collar. Job done, right? Not quite. When the humans are gone and the dog is in the house alone with the cat, the chase happens and something bad can happen as a result.

How do you know what association the dog has made without the dog being able to communicate that to you through language? If we are relying on body language and behavior to know if the dog has made the association we want, isn't it possible we could be wrong?

Haven't you ever misread your spouse, parent, child, partner based on his/her mood and behavior? You thought it was because of a particular thing or situation but you were incorrect. It is only after you use language and communicate about it that you are able to see where the misunderstanding was. Can you see how important it is to know exactly what association your dog has made instead of making assumptions?

Feedback game

When we live in a world without language, we are reduced to the hot/cold game we used to play when we were children. We are only able to give feedback for behavior that is currently happening. In the game, we say hot when the person is closer to what we want and cold when the person is farther from what we want. It is sometimes fun but in reality, it is a vulnerable way of seeking and applying feedback to try to figure something out. This is where our dogs are all the time. Some are better risk takers and do better seeking and applying feedback and making adjustments to their behavior. Some dogs are not, and they live in a more cautious world taking fewer risks.

Using and applying punishment

This article isn't intended to conclude that punishment is bad and should never be used with dogs. Punishment is a reality of life. It isn't always the humans applying punishment. Life has a way of playing the hot/cold game with our dogs with both positive and negative things. Dogs have natural hazard avoidance to keep them safe and to keep them from existing in an unsure, fearful state all the time. What I want you to understand is how complicated the world can be for your dog when we use any form of negative consequence during dog training.

The proper application for any negative consequence has to hit a sweet spot of learning. That is a moving target when dealing with dog behavior.

Understanding behavior modification

Behavior is essentially anything a person does. The simplest way to determine what qualifies as a behavior is to give the "dead man's test". Can a dead man do it? If he can, then it is not a behavior. Can a dead man lay still? Yes. Can a dead man not talk? Yes. Can a dead man not pay attention? Yes.

When selecting a target behavior to analyze and alter, an action that can be observed must be selected. Can a dead man get out of his seat? No. Can a dead man talk? No. Can a dead man engage in off-task behavior (e.g., talking, looking around the room, fidgeting with objects)? No.

The same principle applies to behavior modification for dogs. We need to train behaviors, not non-behaviors. Examples of behaviors: eye contact with the owner, turning away from food on the counter, watching the cat in a relaxed manner, quietly watching the mailman deliver mail, lying down in a designated place while humans are eating, interacting gently with the other dog, etc. Examples of non-behaviors in the same situations: not looking at the owner, not stealing food off the counter, not chasing the cat, not barking at the mailman, not begging, leaving the dog alone, etc.

When a behavior consultant analyzes behavior based on what an owner reports about their dog, we look at what the dog should do instead. Behaviors always occur in sequences or in chains of events. We call that the ABCs of behavior. There is the Antecedent, Behavior, and Consequence that we need to look at. Let's look at a common sequence where the dog steals an item and parades around with it while you chase him. The antecedent is the item within the dog's ability to steal. The behavior is the stealing and running. The consequence is that we chase the dog to get the item back. What fun!

With behavior modification, we also need to look at why the unwanted behavior is occurring in the first place. There are two basic motivations or reinforcements for behavior: extrinsic and intrinsic rewards. Extrinsic rewards are things that happen outside of the dog to keep the behavior going. Using the same example as above, a dog steals your shoe and runs around with it because you are likely to chase him. He runs and you chase. That is an extrinsic reward. Intrinsic rewards are things that happen inside the dog to keep the behavior going. With the stolen shoe, the intrinsic reward is the fun the dog has when you chase him. But there are even more intrinsic rewards in that scenario. The dog gets an adrenaline rush from being chased which triggers a dopamine response. Dopamine is a chemical messenger that plays a role in how a dog feels pleasure. The act of the entire sequence releases pleasure hormones for your dog.

So simply not chasing the dog when he steals your shoe isn't always enough to change the behavior. Remember all the intrinsic as well as extrinsic rewards in that one sequence. A behavior consultant is always analyzing the ABCs of your dog's behavior. We are also analyzing the ABCs of your behavior. We are analyzing all the intrinsic and extrinsic motivators that sustain the behavior. Then we need to zero in on the best way to approach entire situation. This means that we develop target behaviors that are not compatible with the problem behavior.

We are not just trying to stop the behavior which is what an owner is looking to do. Stopping the behavior is merely pressing a pause button on the sequence. The dog has to know what to do instead or else the original behavior will likely come back in some form. There are even some forms of negative consequences can create alternate behaviors when properly applied. Our goal is to decrease one behavior and increase others. The dog has to find that a new behavior is more worthwhile in order to keep him from going back to the old sequence.

Remember the intrinsic and extrinsic rewards we already learned about? Just because you applied a punisher doesn't mean the rewards in the original problematic behavior vanish. We need to create rewards in something else in order to create behavioral equity. Behavior must always be in balance. If we stop something, we must do something else. Remember the dead man test or the dead dog test.

Shot gun learning vs. precision learning

Unfortunately, much of the training that dogs receive is in the form of "shot gun training." We create a consequence (positive or negative) in the form of feedback, and we end up casting a very wide net of what could be associated with that particular consequence. Remember, dogs think and see in tremendous detail not sequences. For a dog to understand sequences, they must be repeated until they are predictable to the dog. Through this repetition, dogs are able to make amazing associations.

I had a client who had a dog with separation anxiety. Her dog knew when she was leaving for work and would have an emotional meltdown but if she just ran out for a quick errand for a short time, her dog was at ease. Why? Because she closed her blinds when she left for work but not for a quick errand. It took us over an hour of going through every detail of her departure routine in each circumstance. We finally figured it out and we were able to retrain her dog to feel safe with all departures through behavior modification and repetition.

We all can retell tales of our dog's amazing intelligence because he knows uncanny things. This is all through repetition. One shot learning should never be considered reliable because we have no idea what association was being made. There is no way to zero in on the exact detail for the association we want without repetition.

This is why it is very important that we use the lowest level of correction possible in addition to rewarding alternative behaviors. We need repetition of this sequence for the dog to make the associations we are looking for them to make. Using consequences based on fear and pain thereby causing this "one shot" learning is not a reliable way to train your dog.

Low levels are important in order to teach sequences that pave the way for safe learning. Dogs need to figure out safe vs. hazardous; what works and what doesn't; and what to do instead.

Remember, dogs don't follow rules in the way humans do. One shot learning is rarely reliable. Instead, it creates a suppression of many behaviors. Eventually, that suppression will lift causing inconsistency in your training and a porpoising behavior in your dog. Porpoising is when behavior runs repetitive cycles up and down. The dog does what we don't want. Then he stops when we buckle down on training. We stop training and the dog is again, doing what we don't want and then it stops when we train again. I see many clients in this cycle with their dogs for long periods of time. Imagine how confusing this is for a dog.

Summary

Punishment or any negative consequence in dog training is complicated. Please rely upon a certified behavior and training expert who can guide you through the process and recommend the best training protocol for your dog. This way we can analyze every part of the behavior sequence and create a targeted learning plan for your dog.

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