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CANINE PUNISHMENT

Punishment is the application of a stimulus that decreases the chances that a behavior will be repeated. It must be timed to coincide with the undesirable behavior, and must be unpleasant enough to deter the dog from repeating the behavior. Keep in mind that you are punishing the behavior not the dog. Therefore punishment to dissuade an undesirable behavior might be acceptable, especially if the dog immediately and consistently stops when punished. However punishment as a form of training is inappropriate and can lead to fear and avoidance. Punishment should never be considered unless the pet has the means to satisfy its nature and its needs. For example, the chewing dog should be provided with appropriate exercise and appealing toys to chew on, before any attempts to punish undesirable chewing are initiated. If however, we can train our pets to do what they are supposed to do and provide outlets for their needs, then it will seldom be necessary to punish inappropriate behavior.



How can punishment be used to correct behavior problems?

The key to successful punishment is to associate an unpleasant consequence with the undesirable behavior. Remember that punishment must take place while the behavior is occurring, not after. Physical or direct interactive punishment is likely to lead to fear of the owner and fear of the hand. Therefore the use of punishment products may be more appropriate and more effective, since they are less likely to be associated with the owner, and are more specific and immediate than an owner's voice or physical handling. Most of these devices actually serve to interrupt or disrupt the inappropriate behavior, so that the dog can be directed to perform an appropriate behavior, and as such may not be a true form of punishment. For example, the dog that is barking could be interrupted with an air horn or shaker can and immediately taught to

approach the owners to play with a favored toy. On the other hand, if the pet is frightened of repeating a behavior because the environment is set up (booby-trapped) to deter the pet, then the owner does not even need to be present to stop the behavior.

Punishment should never be used to train a pet. The pet should be taught what we want using lure reward methods, rewards and shaping or prompting and rewards. It is illogical to wait until the pet misbehaves and then administer something unpleasant. Punishing the pet can lead to fear of the owner, fear of handling or fear of particular stimuli (approach, reaching out, pulling leash). If punishment is effective it can at best stop the behavior from recurring in that location but will not stop the behavior (e.g. chewing, elimination) from being repeated at other times or locations. With owner initiated punishment the pet may soon learn to inhibit the behavior in the owner's presence (and continue the behavior in the owner's absence). On the other hand, where punishment is not sufficiently unpleasant it may serve as a reward

(attention). Therefore, if the pet continues the behavior after one or two applications of the punishment then it is ineffective and should be discontinued.

Punishing the dog while the owner remains out of sight is a better way of teaching the pet to avoid the behavior altogether, whether the owner is present or not. This is known as 'remote punishment' (punishment administered by the owner while remaining out of sight) and takes a great deal of preparation, time and forethought. Perhaps the only practical application of punishment is to booby-trap the area (sometimes known as 'environmental punishment'), so that the dog is punished even in the owner's absence.

What is 'direct interactive punishment' and how does it work?

If you catch your puppy engaging in an incorrect behavior, try a loud noise such as clapping your hands or a loud "uh-uh". Remember, reprimands need to occur while the behavior is happening, preferably just as it begins, and never after. Often puppies will be startled when they hear these noises and temporarily stop the behavior. At that time you need to quickly redirect the puppy to a more appropriate task.

Another way to interrupt your puppy is with various types of noise devices. One such device is a "shaker can". This is an empty soda can that has a few pennies inside and then is taped shut. When given a vigorous shake it makes a loud noise that will often interrupt the puppy's behavior. Other devices that make a loud noise are ultrasonic trainers, battery operated alarms, and air horns. (see our handout on 'Behavior management products').

How does remote punishment work?

For remote techniques to be successful there are two key elements. The owner must be able to monitor the dog to determine when the undesirable behavior begins and must be able to administer the "punishment" while remaining out of sight. A long range water rifle, a remote citronella collar or a long leash left attached to the dog's head halter often work best. To know when the problem begins you will need to watch your dog closely while remaining out of sight (from around a corner, or perhaps through a window if the dog is outdoors). A one way mirror, intercom, or motion detector might also be practical methods of remotely monitoring behavior. Then as soon as the dog enters the area or begins to perform the undesirable behavior, the remote punishment device can be activated. If your dog finds the noise or spray unpleasant and cannot determine where it is coming from it should quickly learn to stay away from the area whether the owner is present or not.



How can I booby-trap the environment to punish the pet?

Punishing the behavior remotely, with the owner out of sight, is impractical if the owner is away from home or unavailable to supervise. Booby-traps are a way of teaching the pet to avoid the area, or the behavior itself. Some innovative ways to discourage a dog from entering an area where an undesirable behavior is likely to be performed (garbage raiding, chewing, entering rooms) would be to make the area less appealing by placing balloons set to pop, a pyramid of empty cans set to topple, or a bucket of water set to dump as the pet enters the area. Mousetrap trainers, motion detectors, alarm mats, shock mats, and indoor electronic "fencing", are also effective at keeping dogs away from problem areas (see our handout on 'Behavior management products').

Taste deterrents might also be helpful for destructive chewing, provided they are unpleasant enough to deter the behavior. Products such as bitter apple, bitter lime or Tabasco sauce are often recommended, but many dogs do not mind, or learn to enjoy the taste. A little water mixed with cayenne pepper, oil of eucalyptus, any non-toxic mentholated product, or one of the commercial anti-chew sprays often work best. To be effective, the first exposure to a product must be as repulsive as is humanely possible, so that the dog is immediately repelled whenever it smells or tastes that product again. Never leave any objects or areas untreated until the dog learns to leave the object or area alone.

What is negative punishment and how does it work?

All of the punishment techniques discussed above are forms of positive punishment, in which the application of an unpleasant stimulus decreases the chance that the pet will repeat the behavior. Another form of punishment occurs when a reward is removed as a consequence for a behavior. In other words, the removal of something pleasant is punishing the pet because it is learning that good things are taken away if the behavior is repeated. For example, if the puppy is playing and this escalates to play biting and you stop the game and walk away this is known as negative punishment.

What should I do if I find the problem after it has already occurred?

If you find something that your puppy has done (destruction, elimination), but you did not catch him in the act, just clean it up and vow to supervise your puppy better in the future. Do not get your puppy and bring him over to the mess and yell and physically discipline him. Remember that you need to punish the behavior you wish to change. If you did not see your puppy chew up the object, all you are doing is disciplining your puppy for being present at a mess on the floor. Since that makes no sense to your puppy, your reprimands could create fear and anxiety, which could lead to aggression and owner avoidance.



If I must not punish my dog after the problem has occurred, what can be done?

Other than designing appropriate environmental booby-traps, the only thing that you can do to avoid undesirable behavior is to supervise your puppy when you are around, and to prevent access to potential problems when you are not available to supervise. Keeping a leash attached to a head halter will allow you to maintain good supervision and interrupt problems immediately when you are around and supervising. Remember that problems such as chewing and other forms of destructiveness are part of the puppies' normal curiosity and desire to chew. Always provide suitable play objects designed to entertain your puppy so that he will not want to destroy your possessions (see also handout on 'Destructiveness – chewing').