

Why punishment **fails**; what works **better**

Think some form of punishment is necessary when training your dog? The following examples will show you why it just doesn't work and can make matters even worse. *By Valarie V. Tynes, DVM, DACVB*

Punishing a dog often doesn't work or can even make a behavior problem worse. Three important rules must be met for punishment to be effective.

- 1.** The punishment must occur every time the unwanted behavior occurs.
- 2.** The punishment must be administered within a second or two of the inappropriate behavior.
- 3.** The punishment must be aversive enough to stop the dog from repeating the unwanted behavior in the future but not be so aversive as to frighten the dog.

Meeting all three of these criteria can be difficult. That's why punishment often fails to solve behavior problems and should not be the first training method of choice. Positive reinforcement training, in which animals are rewarded for appropriate behaviors, is safer and more effective.

As seen in the two examples below, punishment teaches an animal what you don't want it to do but fails to teach it what you expect of it.

Example A

Problem behavior: A dog gets on the furniture.

Owner's response: Every time the owner sees the dog on the furniture, she yells at it and threatens it with a rolled up newspaper.



When she does this, the dog slinks off the furniture.

Result: The dog continues to get on the furniture, although it is less likely to do so in the owner's presence. Because the dog still gets on the furniture when the owner is away, it is being rewarded part of the time for the unwanted behavior, and the first rule above is not being met. So the punishment does not solve the problem. If the owner gets increasingly frustrated with the dog, she may increase the severity of the punishment, and depending on the dog's temperament, it may respond by becoming fearful of the owner and avoiding her. Some dogs might even begin growling and snapping when the owner approaches.

Suggestion: Success will be more likely if the owner blocks the dog's access to the furniture whenever she can't be around (e.g. confine the dog to a crate or a different room in the house). Or the owner can make the furniture less appealing by covering it with plastic. Commercially available devices for keeping animals off surfaces such as elastic mats, plastic mats with rigid points (or plastic carpet protector material laid upside down) can also be used. A comfortable bed should also be made available to the dog in the vicinity of the favored furniture, and the dog should be rewarded every time it is caught resting on the bed.

Example B

Problem behavior: A dog greets people by jumping on them.

Owners' response: Whenever the dog jumps on its owners, they knee it in the chest or kick it.

Result: The dog avoids the husband (the largest man in the household; he has kicked the dog hard enough that it is now afraid of him) but continues to jump on everyone else. Many dogs are highly motivated to greet people by getting close to their faces. In most cases, kneeling or kicking such a dog is less powerful than the dog's desire to greet people by jumping on them. In addition, since not all people the dog meets will knee it or kick it, the punishment doesn't meet the first rule. The third rule is also not met because the dog doesn't always perceive the kneeling as punishment and, in fact, is reinforced for jumping because it's getting attention.

Suggestion: Rather than trying to punish the dog for jumping, the owners should use positive reinforcement to teach the dog to sit to greet everyone. Sitting is an alternative behavior that can be rewarded with petting or a food treat.

Appropriate behavior modification

These examples highlight the fact that when the punishment criteria are not met, behavior problems can worsen, and the bond between the pet and the owner can be damaged beyond repair. When punishment is used incorrectly, it will appear unpredictable and confusing, so many pets become anxious or fearful around the owner that administers the punishment. When punishment is used in an attempt to train an animal that is already afraid or anxious, its fear and anxiety are likely to worsen and may lead to aggression.

If your dog is exhibiting inappropriate behavior, consult your veterinarian. He or she will help you develop an appropriate behavior modification program that focuses on using positive reinforcement or will refer you to someone with extensive experience in developing such behavior modification programs.

