

## TALES FROM A DOG BEHAVIOURIST:

### Crime and Punishment

I recently spoke to a client who was having trouble house-training their puppy. I asked what methods they had tried, and they said that they'd scolded the pup, given her a light smack on the bum and rubbed her nose in her mess. Basically, they were punishing the pup for behaving unacceptably. I'm sure we've all punished our dogs at some point or another for a behaviour that we don't appreciate. Punishment is not as easy or simple as it seems though.

Firstly, what is punishment in dog behaviour terms? There are two types of punishment, positive and negative. Positive punishment involves applying an aversive stimulus, such as a smack or a loud scolding. Negative punishment involves taking away a pleasurable stimulus, such as removing a toy or withholding attention. Punishment is supposed to decrease the likelihood of a dog behaving in a certain way in future, but so often it is ineffective. This is because punishment is far more complex than simply shouting at your dog when you find them chewing your shoes.

Here's the first thing to keep in mind – you never a dog, you punish their incorrect *behaviour*. It is not your dog that is wrong; what they have done is wrong, and very often what we find unacceptable is perfectly normal for dogs, so focus on the behaviour, not the dog.

Possibly the most important aspect of punishment is timing. As with the client I discussed earlier, rubbing your pup's nose in their mess or scolding them after you find their mess, is not going to work. You have to catch your dog in the act and you have about a second to apply a punishment. This is because, unlike us, dogs live in the moment and they will associate a punishment with whatever they are doing in that moment. Countless times, I have heard clients say 'I came home to find that Rex had dug a big hole in the garden. He knew he'd done something wrong, he looked guilty.' Sorry, but no, your dog does not know what they've done wrong and they do not look guilty. The 'guilty' look is head lowered, ears back, tail tucked in and the dog usually looks subdued or avoids their owner. This is not guilt, it is either submission or fear, because the dog has learnt that they will punished randomly when their owner arrives homes, or because they sense their owner's anger and know what usually follows that emotion. Punishing a dog after the fact, even a few seconds following an

undesirable behaviour, is unlikely to have the effect that you want. You're probably just going to end up with a confused and fearful dog that continues all the behaviours that you don't want.

How do you decide what intensity of punishment to use? This is extremely difficult. If the intensity of the punishment is too low, it will have no effect, but if the intensity of the punishment is too high, you may create fear and anxiety. So, the punishment must be strong enough to be effective, but sufficiently weak to be safe. If the intensity is too high, your dog will shy away from you, cower or avoid you for a while, and you may create anxious behaviours. If it is too low, your dog will continue the behaviour. The goal is to use the lowest intensity possible to achieve the desired effect.

Punishment has to be implemented every time a dog behaves in an unacceptable manner. Punishing your dog randomly for something is not going to work. A behaviour cannot be wrong sometimes and okay at other times; it must be wrong every time. Consistency is vital when teaching your dog what you want.

An important factor to be mindful of is why your dog is behaving in a certain way, what is their motivation? The greater the motivation for the behaviour, the less likely it is that any punishment will be effective. If the motivation for the behaviour is fear or anxiety (such as in some cases of excessive barking or destruction), then punishment is a bad idea – it will probably increase the dog's unwanted behaviour by increasing their fear or anxiety.

The best way to make use of punishment is to encourage a competing behaviour for which the dog is rewarded. So you've told your dog that they cannot do something – but what can they do instead? For example, if you find your dog chewing on your plants, say 'No' firmly and then immediately give them an alternative such as a toy or chewie.

These are the general principles behind punishment. I could go into more depth, but it is not necessary. My goal was to show that punishment is neither simple nor easy, can lead to various problematic and abnormal behaviours when used incorrectly, and should be used with absolute consideration and caution. Personally, I try to keep punishment to a minimum, or avoid it completely, because it is so difficult to implement successfully. My general rules regarding punishment are never punish a normal behaviour such as urinating (would you like to be scared of going to the toilet?); use the mildest punishment possible only when you catch your dog in the act; never punish a dog by smacking them on the nose (it's the most sensitive

area on their body, and it encourages cowering); never get angry with your dog when you've found that they've done something wrong, it's done and over – let it go; ignoring an unwanted behaviour is preferable to punishing incorrectly. Preventing the need to punish is the ultimate goal. For example, if you exercise your dog daily, you will prevent many of the behaviours that most people consider 'bad'. And don't think that your dog is too old to learn how to behave as you'd like – a dog's behaviour can be modified at any age. Instead of punishing your dog, ask a behaviourist or trainer for advice on alternatives.

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