

Aversives

About Aversives in Training



In this handout, the term "aversive" refers to the delivery of something unpleasant in an attempt to stop unwanted behaviour. Commonly known as corrections, these aversives include jerking the leash, scolding or a smack with a newspaper.

Introduction

Ten-year-old Sally was reading a book. Her mom walked in and screamed at her, grabbed her by her collar and shook her. Sally was astonished. Thoughts going through Sally's mind: "Ouch, I'm afraid!" "Why is Mom punishing me?" "Mom always encourages me to read." "Am I bad for sitting in Dad's chair?" "Is this library book late?" "Is Mom having a bad day?" In fact, Sally was punished because she hadn't washed the dishes. Think about Sally's confusion. Think about how you will train your dog.

- IT IS AN INCOMPLETE PROGRAM

Aversives only addresses what NOT to do. You might be lucky. Your dog might stop the punished behaviour due to distraction, but then what? It's not nice to mug visitors, but is your dog clear on what behaviour is expected? (See "Taxi!!" at the end).

- IT CAN ESCALATE FEARFUL BEHAVIOURS

While walking, your dog sees a man in a hat. She's worried. She barks at him and pulls back. You holler and jerk her leash. Now she has to worry about him AND you. In addition, she might perceive that you are also reacting to the man, confirming to her that the guy really is scary. (Ask your instructor about Counter-Conditioning.)

- INEFFECTIVE USE MAY BECOME A REWARD

Your dog is in the backyard barking. You open the door and holler, "Stop it!" What you consider a punishment, your dog may find rewarding. You're looking at him and talking to him--if he's barking to seek attention, he's been rewarded, regardless of what you are saying to him. (Teach an incompatible behaviour.)

- IT MIGHT DAMAGE YOUR RELATIONSHIP

Punishment can cause confusion and reduces the trust that is so important between you and your dog. It's best to earn your dog's respect by consistent guidance and positive training, not to demand it through intimidation or force.

- IT NEEDS TO BE IMMEDIATE IN ORDER TO BE EFFECTIVE

For any chance of the appropriate association to be learned, punishment should occur within about two seconds of the behaviour. How's your timing? Can you pull that off?

- IT MIGHT OR MIGHT NOT GENERALIZE

You said "Heel" but your dog strains ahead. You jerk the leash. What's the point? No pulling? No pulling on this block? No pulling on sidewalks, but okay to pull on paths? We don't really know if dogs learn what we are trying to teach! (Ask your instructor how to teach your dog to WANT to walk on a loose leash.)

- IT ONLY SUPPRESSES BEHAVIOUR BUT; IT DOES NOT CHANGE THE UNDERLYING EMOTIONS

Owners hope that punishment will stop a behaviour. There is evidence to suggest that adding an aversive after an unwanted behaviour may only "stun", or suppress, the behaviour temporarily, if it works at all. (Instead, we teach the dog what we WANT him to do.)

- **IT IS VERY UNCERTAIN WHETHER YOUR DOG WILL MAKE THE RIGHT ASSOCIATION**

If you scream at your dog for chasing a cat, will he think he shouldn't have chased the cat? Or think you are angry because he didn't go faster and actually CATCH the cat? A child was nearby when you hollered at your dog. Will the dog link your punishment and his anxiety to children? (*Reduce grey areas by using clicker training.*)

- **IT CAN LEAD TO THE LEARNED HELPLESSNESS SYNDROME**

The dog decides that no matter what she does, it's wrong, therefore it's safer to do nothing at all. She gives up, she shuts down, she just endures the punishment. (*Teach your dog an acceptable behaviour.*)

- **IT COULD GENERATE A SUBSTITUTE BEHAVIOUR THAT IS ALSO UNDESIRABLE**

Repetitive actions, such as barking, digging and chewing can calm a dog, much like rocking a baby has a calming effect. It feels good. If your dog is getting a "barker's high" and you stop the barking, she might turn to a substitute behaviour for her gratification. The new behaviour might be more annoying or dangerous. (*Don't leave it up to the dog – decide what you want him to do instead and teach him that.*)

THE CYCLE OF VIOLENCE

Children are watching and you are a role model. Research suggests that a childhood fraught with violence, abuse or disregard of animals produces people who may pass the same behaviors on to next generations.

- **IT MAY CAUSE PUNISHMENT CALLUS**

Learning science suggests that a punishment should be aversive and intense enough to stop the behaviour right away. If it is not effective, the tendency is for people to escalate the strength of successive punishments. The resulting "callus" you have built now requires you to administer a harsher punishment than would have been necessary before you desensitized your dog. (*It's kinder and easier for both you and your dog to teach the appropriate behaviour.*)

- **IT MUST BE DO-ABLE BY THE OWNER AND FAMILY**

Few owners have the skill or desire to deliver a successful punishment. (Reward-based training is more forgiving.) If your timing is off with positive reinforcement, the result is only an extra pat or treat for your dog.

- **IT MAY CAUSE YOUR DOG TO THINK IT IS CONTINGENT ON YOUR PRESENCE**

Your dog should perceive the aversive as a direct result of his behaviour. The consequence should seem to come from the environment. If instead the consequence is linked to you, your dog might risk engaging in bad behaviour when he knows you're not around to see. (*Positive training builds motivation for your dog to do the "right" thing.*)

ASK YOURSELF: WHERE IS THE LINE BETWEEN "PUNISHMENT" AND "ABUSE"?

Where's the line between the use of aversive techniques in the name of training... and abuse?

ASK YOURSELF: DOES THE USE OF AN AVERSIVE MAKE YOU FEEL BETTER?

The goal of your training techniques should be to change your dog's behaviour. It should not be a means to vent your own frustration. The two issues should be dealt with separately.

TAXI!!

You get into a taxi in Victoria. You tell the driver: "I don't want to go to the airport," "Don't you dare take me to Butchart Gardens," "You know better than to drive me to the ferry terminal," "No! Bad! Not the Empress Hotel!". Can the taxi driver possibly please you? This negative manner of communication conveys no message of what you actually want... And it's stressful for the driver.

Sources:

(Information from the experience of Terry Ryan. Facts and research by R Bailey, M & K Breland, M Burch, R Lockwood, K Pryor, B Schwartz, K Sdao, M Sidman, M Seligman, BF Skinner & others.).

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