

# Corrections

## The Problems with Corrections in Training



In this handout, the term "correction" refers to the delivery of something unpleasant in an attempt to stop unwanted behaviour. Sometimes also known as "punishment" or "aversives", corrections include anything from "No!" and other verbal corrections, to jerking the leash, smacking with a newspaper, to the use of electric shock collars.

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.

### - CORRECTION-BASED TRAINING IS AN INCOMPLETE PROGRAM

Corrections only address what NOT to do. You might be lucky. Your dog might stop the punished behaviour because you interrupted it, 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).

### - CORRECTIONS ARE LIKELY TO ESCALATE FEAR AND ANXIETY

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 *Desensitization and Counter-Conditioning.*)

### - A CORRECTION MAY BE PERCEIVED BY THE DOG AS A REWARD

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

### - CORRECTIONS ARE LIKELY TO DAMAGE YOUR RELATIONSHIP

Corrections can cause confusion and reduce the trust that is so important between you and your dog. It is better - and safer! - to earn your dog's respect by consistent guidance and positive training, not to demand it through intimidation or force.

### - CORRECTIONS NEED TO BE IMMEDIATE IN ORDER TO BE EFFECTIVE

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

### - CORRECTIONS MIGHT OR MIGHT NOT GENERALIZE

You said "Heel" but your dog strains ahead. You jerk the leash. What is the point? No pulling? No pulling on this block? No pulling on sidewalks, but okay to pull on paths? We do not 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.)

### - CORRECTIONS ONLY SUPPRESS BEHAVIOUR BUT DO NOT SOLVE THE UNDERLYING PROBLEM

Owners hope that corrections will stop a behaviour. There is evidence to suggest that adding a correction 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.)

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- **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 should not have chased the cat? Or will he think you are angry because he did not go faster and actually CATCH the cat? A child was nearby when you hollered at your dog. Will the dog link your correction to his nervousness around children? (*Reduce grey areas by using marker-based training, like a clicker, to teach an incompatible behaviour.*)

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

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

- **CORRECTIONS 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. (*Do not 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.

- **CORRECTIONS MAY CAUSE PUNISHMENT CALLUS**

Learning science suggests that a punishment should be intensely unpleasant, enough so that it will stop the behaviour immediately and permanently. If it is not immediately 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 is kinder and easier for both you and your dog to teach the appropriate behaviour.*)

- **YOUR DOG MAY LEARN THAT CORRECTIONS ONLY HAPPEN WHEN YOU ARE THERE**

Your dog should perceive the correction as a direct result of his behaviour. However, there is no way we can guarantee what the dog will associate the correction with. If the dog associates the correction with your presence, your dog might risk engaging in bad behaviour when he knows you are 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 is the line between the use of corrections in the name of training... and abuse?

**ASK YOURSELF: DOES THE USE OF A CORRECTION 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:

- Dog training methods: their use, effectiveness and interaction with behaviour and welfare by Hiby, Rooney, Bradshaw (2004)
- Effects of 2 training methods on stress-related behaviors of the dog (Canis familiaris) and on the dog-owner relationship by Deldalle & Gaunet (2014)
- The effects of using aversive training methods in dogs - A review by Ziv (2017)
- The use of electronic collars for training domestic dogs: estimated prevalence, reasons and risk factors for use, and owner perceived success as compared to other training methods by Blackwell et al (2012)
- The Links Between Animal Abuse and Family Violence, as Reported by Women Entering Shelters in Calgary Communities by McIntosh (2004)
- Additional research by R Bailey, M & K Breland, M Burch, R Lockwood, K Pryor, B Schwartz , K Sdao, M Sidman, M Seligman, BF Skinner & others and information from Terry Ryan..

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