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USING PUNISHMENT EFFECTIVELY

Punishment is the application of a stimulus that decreases the chance 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. Punishment should 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. The pet justifiably might become defensive and even if the behavior ceases when the owner is watching, it might continue in the owner's absence. 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. Many 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

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 or air spray), alarm or electronic stimulation mats, irritating odors, and indoor electronic “fencing” might all be effective at keeping pets 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 better. 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 pet 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 pet 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 pet chew up the object or eliminate in the area, all you are doing is disciplining your pet for being present at a mess on the floor. Since that makes no sense to your pet, your reprimands could create fear and anxiety, which could lead to aggression and owner avoidance.

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

There is no point in punishing undesirable behavior once it has ceased. Other than designing appropriate environmental booby-traps, the only thing that you can do to avoid undesirable behavior is to supervise your pet 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 for dogs, or a leash attached to a body harness for cats, 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 may be part of normal exploratory play. Always provide suitable play objects designed to entertain your pet so that he will not want to destroy your possessions (See also handouts on ‘Destructiveness’).