

The World is Not Flat - Nor is Positive Training Permissive

In the days when people believed the earth was flat there was no evidence to indicate that it was any other way. Not until adventurers returned from the point from whence they should have fallen from the earth did people begin to comprehend that the facts did not accord with their traditional perception. Similarly, in days gone by, we had no cause to believe there was any other way of training except by the use of punishment based learning. For many years now the adventurers of dog training have been bringing back evidence that there is actually a better, kinder, more humane option for training dogs – all dogs. To make an informed choice about the methods to choose to train our dogs we need to be cognisant of the facts.

The American Veterinary Society of Animal Behaviour (AVSAB) has issued a Position Statement and Guidelines regarding the use of punishment for dealing with behaviour problems in animals (www.AVSABonline.org). For the purposes of this Position Statement and Guidelines, punishment has been defined as "...the use of force, coercion or aversives to modify behaviour" (AVSAB Guidelines, 2007. p. 3). The AVSAB is very clear in stating - "AVSAB's position is that punishment should not be used as a first-line or early-use treatment for behaviour problems. This is due to the potential adverse effects which include but are not limited to: inhibition of learning increased fear-related and aggressive behaviours and injury to animals and people interacting with animals" (AVSAB Position Statement, 2007, p. 1)

The Guidelines detail both physical and psychological reasons why punishment based training is not recommended. In brief the list explains that punishment:

- ◆ Is difficult to time correctly
- ◆ Can strengthen the undesired behaviour
- ◆ Must be high enough in intensity for learning to occur
- ◆ May cause physical harm when administered at high intensity
- ◆ Can cause some individuals to become extremely fearful and this fear can generalise to other contexts (regardless of the strength of the punishment)
- ◆ Can facilitate or even cause aggressive behaviour
- ◆ Can suppress behaviours, including those behaviours that warn that a bite may occur
- ◆ Can lead to a bad association
- ◆ Does not teach more appropriate behaviours (AVSAB Guidelines, 2007. p. 4)

The guidelines state that "Even when punishment seems mild, in order to be effective it must elicit a strong fear response...Punishment has also been shown to elicit aggressive behaviour in many species of animals. Thus using punishment can put the person administering it or any person near the animal at risk of being bitten or attacked" (AVSAB Guidelines, 2007. p. 2).

Why would an organisation like the Veterinary Society of Animal Behaviour feel so strongly about the use of punishment that it issues a position statement and guideline about it? Could it be that evidence based alternatives are available? The Guidelines explain that rather than punish an animal's poor behaviour "A more appropriate approach to problem solving is to focus on reinforcing a more appropriate behaviour" (AVSAB Guidelines, 2007, p. 4). *This is the approach of positive reinforcement training.* Not just for dogs but for all animals. What must be remembered is that basic learning theory is the same, irrespective of the animal species. Let's face it, if you get cross with a killer whale or a sea lion which you are training, he will just swim away from you. But positive reinforcement training works for these animals (Ramirez, 1999), known for their aggression and if learning theory is the same for all animal species, why would you chose to use punishment based training on dogs?

Friedman and Brinker (2008) state "Another problem is that punishment is what most of us do best, or at least first...We are virtually surrounded by punishing strategies used to influence our behaviour: from overdue library books to dogs without licenses; fines, penalties and reprimands...For many of us, to give up punishment as our primary tool with which to influence negative behaviour is to leave us empty handed". They go on to say that it is essential that people narrow the gap between the research and practice of punishment and learn to base their choice of teaching strategies "...on facts rather than cultural inheritance".

Extensive research on the effects of punishment has been carried out. This research "spans many decades and has been replicated with many different species of animals, including humans...the fact is there is a pattern of negative reactions or "side effects" that are consistently observed in many subjects who have been punished..." (Friedman & Brinker, 2008).

There is conflicting information in the print media, on the television and almost everywhere one seeks information. Dog guardians may feel overwhelmed, confused, conflicted and too inexperienced to choose. Sue Pearson, Certified Professional Dog Trainer with the Certification Council of Pet Dog Trainers (an international accrediting body) and holder of a Masters Degree in Education writes about training choices "If you think it might hurt the dog, it probably will. If it looks unsafe, it might be. If you wouldn't want others to see you do it, then don't do it. Disclaimers of "don't try this at home" should be carefully scrutinized. "Dog friendly" training can be done safely and easily, anywhere, anytime. It can be effectively carried out by trained professionals, pet owners and even children, at home in the comfort of your living room or on the concrete drive of your local service station" (Pearson, 2006, www.iowasource.com).

So what is positive reinforcement training?

"The single biggest difference between the two schools [approaches to training] is the mind set of the trainer. While the traditional trainer looks to 'correct' undesired behaviour, the positive trainer looks only for what the dog is doing right" (Bridge, 2002).

"One of the most common misconceptions about positive training is that all we do is feed the dog, regardless of what the dog is doing, or that we allow the dog to get away with bad behaviour. Nothing could be further from the truth. Positive training manipulates consequences so that the dog will do what we want.

All behaviour is driven by consequences - either the dog does something because it is reinforced (i.e. it pays off in some way, is rewarded), or the dog does something to avoid punishment or something unpleasant. Learning by consequences is a method of learning common to all species and the scientific term for this is *operant conditioning*.

One area of operant conditioning is called *positive reinforcement*. This simply means that a consequence is applied after the performance of a behaviour that makes that behaviour more likely to occur again in the future. Positive trainers take advantage of this principle when training dogs. We set the dog up so that it cannot make a mistake and then we reinforce what the dog does correctly by applying a consequence that the dog likes. Naturally the dog will want to repeat this behaviour since it gets reinforced and while he is busy doing good things he is not doing bad things. By careful management we avoid placing a dog in a situation where he can fail. This avoids the need to use punishment (which is frequently unnecessarily used in dog training) and it can hardly be considered allowing the dog to run amok.

Another method of learning common to all species is called *respondent conditioning*, also known as *classical* or *Pavlovian conditioning*. This is learning by association. If something is pleasant, fun and exciting, the dog will want to do it again. If an activity is boring, or scary, or associated with pain, the dog will want to avoid it. Positive trainers make training enjoyable for dogs so that they are willing partners in the training process. Positive trainers employ methods based on findings that have been described since the late 1800s, by scientists, psychologists and animal trainers, such as

Edward Lee Thorndike, J.B. Watson, Ivan Pavlov, B.F. Skinner, Keller Breland, Marion-Breland Bailey, Bob Bailey, Karen Pryor and many others" (Ford, 2007. www.positivelydogs.com).

Electronic communication by the South Australian Branch of the RSPCA states: "Being positive does not mean being permissive. Our use of rewards (food, toys, play, praise and attention) is just part of a program that includes proper management to limit the dog's opportunities to misbehave....Fortunately we do not need to rely on studies of wolf behaviour when training dogs, as there are decades of evidence-based research on the ways which all animals learn, including dogs. It's called operant conditioning, and is the basis for our approach. Studies confirm that methods such as ours are humane, effective, and far less likely to compromise the relationship between a dog and its owner than any other [Hiby, 2004]. We agree that dogs are highly social animals that need leadership, but it is clear that we can provide this using a positive approach" (2007. www.blog1.rspcasa.asn.au).

How to Establish Leadership Without Dominance

How can you tell if you are a leader of your dog or you are a follower? If your dog brings you a ball and places it on your lap, what do you do most often? Do you throw the ball for the dog? If your dog nudges you for a pat, do you pat your dog? Remember that leaders initiate and followers react! That is not to say that you should never react. Of course you can pat your dog if he asks you to. Of course you can throw the ball for him if he asks you to – *just not all the time*. Establish leadership by ensuring that the initiation/reaction scenario leans towards you doing more of the initiation than the dog (Ryan, n.d.). This is, in part, what positive trainers mean when they say that they manipulate the environment and the consequences to establish the behaviours that they want. This is how they set the dog up for success. This is how positive training works – manipulating the environment and the consequences.

If a strange person approaches a human-aggressive dog the dog will more than likely bark and show aggression. It is also likely that the dog's guardian will drag the dog away or, the approaching person will retreat. Wow! The dog manipulated the consequences and made the scary person go away. Many traditional trainers would punish the dog for that aggressive behaviour. So, not only does an approaching person mean something scary to the human-aggressive dog, it also means that he is likely to get punished (hurt) each time a person approaches. This makes an approaching person even more threatening. A positive trainer will see an approaching person and alter the dog's view of that person (manipulate the consequences of the person's approach). This is done by desensitisation. This is "a procedure in which the dog is exposed to extremely low levels (distance, duration) of the frightening stimulus while wonderful things (the best food, toy, play, petting, praise) are happening to him (while he is calm). The level of the frightening stimulus is gradually increased but never at a rate that causes him distress" (Dennison, 2005, p56). This is the difference between the two schools of thought.

From the RSPCA (2007. www.blog1.rspcasa.asn.au) "However, for those that are determined to cling to the concept of dominance, the positive method of training is still relevant. Surely making a dog work for every bit of food that they need to live puts the owner in the most dominant position available? Leash correction training surely cannot compete with this position of power"

Despite evidence to the contrary, people persist in the belief that wolves and hence dogs have a linear hierarchy and use this to justify their continuance of dominance theory. Kathy Sdao who has a Masters Degree in Experimental Psychology and an advanced graduate degree in the science of animal behaviour, whose past career revolved around training marine mammals for the US Navy and now centres on pet dog training says "Even if dogs did form linear packs, there's no evidence to suggest that they perceive humans as part of their species specific ranking. In general, humans lack the capability to even recognize, let alone replicate, the elegant subtleties of canine body language. So it's hard to imagine that dogs could perceive us as pack members at all" (Sdao, 2007. www.dogcentral.msn.com). A well rounded program that teaches using positive reinforcement also includes training in understanding elements of dog body language. A dog guardian's ability to comprehend what his dog is "saying" with his body is more valuable than oil! If each pet guardian can be taught to understand some of those subtle signals and learn how to correctly address some

of the issues his dog is “talking” about, there would be far fewer aggressive dogs in this world. Our ability to comprehend at least in part what our dogs are telling us is yet another example of how positive trainers set up scenarios of success.

Don't wait until it is too late and the need for correction ever present – manipulate the environment and the consequences of the dog's actions, based on knowledge of the dog and his basic needs and individual idiosyncrasies and you have a recipe for success. Training with aversives is like getting into a taxi and telling the driver all the places you don't want to go. We need to get into the taxi of dog training with the address of the exact point we want to go. If we do, the ride will be less harrowing for the guardian and the destination for the dog a more secure and trusting one.

Having spent twenty of my thirty years of dog training using punishment based methods, I can speak from experience about the benefits of positive reinforcement training. Having crossed over from traditional methods to positives I could never cross back. Correctly understood, taught and undertaken, positive training is fun and can lead dogs and their guardians into a wonderful life-long relationship built on consistency, trust and respect, within clearly defined guidelines. Yes, dog guardians do need to make informed decisions that are very relevant to their entire family and their dogs. That is why it is very important that training methods are presented with a full knowledge and understanding of each. After all, in any learning scenario, presentation of fact, not what is perceived to be fact, aids both teacher and student.

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