

Proud to be a cookie pusher

Aversive training methods aren't limited to shock collars. One dog's pleasure could be another dog's punishment. How well do you know your own dog?

Punish or reward? Correct or redirect? It is maybe the most commonly discussed topic in the world of dog training and behaviour, and it is one that often causes the fur to fly. I am personally aware of friendships that have ended because of these discussions.

Before we begin, I would like to state that I am a proudly upstanding cookie pusher, which

has become a colloquial term used for people who do only kind things with dogs to help them learn and understand. I grew up in the era of smacking dogs with a rolled-up newspaper, throwing plastic bottles containing coins on the floor to make them stop what they were doing, and things to 'show them who the boss is' because they are 'pack animals' and need an 'alpha/pack leader'. Despite this outdated alpha/pack leader theory being based on 1940s research, it still perpetuates through the canine world, but that is a discussion for another day. Fortunately, we now know better.

PERSONAL PUNISHMENT

When many people hear the word 'aversive', they assume it only means measures like electric shock collars or hitting, but it is a little more complicated than that. Some dogs enjoy playing in the water, and some dogs absolutely hate it. Some dogs love being scratched on the chest, and some dogs find this quite unpleasant. I can guarantee that if you sit with a friend and discuss your dogs' respective likes and dislikes, you will find numerous differences. One

of my dogs loved to sleep on the bed, while the other preferred to hop up for an occasional cuddle, then chose to sleep on his bed on the floor.

ROOTS OF CHANGE

Just like humans, every dog is delightfully unique, and it is ultimately down to the animal to decide what they do and do not like or what they find aversive or enjoyable. Dogs are sentient beings and have the right to decide what is OK and what isn't. So, aversive means something that a particular dog finds to be unpleasant at that specific moment.

Force-free is far easier to define, meaning without the use of force or not doing something that the dog finds unpleasant, and a behaviour modification programme is also self-defining – a programme that is implemented in order to change a specific behaviour.

We do what we do because of how we feel, either physically or emotionally, and dogs are no different. The root of changing behaviour means changing the way we feel. If we feel sad, we might cry, and if we want the crying to stop, the most obvious thing to do





Petit Basset Griffon Vendéen. Photo posed by Tim Rose (www.timrosephotography.co.uk)

In order to build bonds that will cement your relationship with your companion, you can never give them a reason not to trust you. Just one zap with an e-collar, one smack with a rolled-up newspaper or one squirt with a water spray is all it takes to break those bonds

is to stop feeling sad. We might do this by listening to a happy song, hugging a loved one, eating some cake or going for a run.

Another thing that might stop us from crying could be if someone told us in no uncertain terms that if we didn't stop crying immediately, there would be serious consequences. Would we stop crying? Possibly. Would we still feel sad? Probably, and maybe also afraid. All that has happened is the crying has been stopped or suppressed in order to prevent the threatened 'serious consequences' that we might encounter as a result.

This is the difference between force-free and aversive behaviour modification.

How about if you were crying, and someone came over, gave you a big hug, a slice of cake and whispered menacingly in your ear, "You had better stop crying or else..." Would you stop crying? Would you have enjoyed the hug? Would you stop feeling sad? Would you feel confused? How would you feel the next time that person hugged you, even without the menacing whisper? This is why the use of aversives is not compatible with a force-free behaviour modification plan.

In my opinion, any relationship needs to be built on trust, consistency and respect, and this includes the relationships that are formed between dogs and humans. I believe there is no quick way to

MEET THE PRACTITIONERS...



KELLY OLDAKER

Kelly is deeply passionate about helping humans to build lasting, meaningful relationships with their pets, using communication, kindness and compassion. Her goal is to help animal guardians live in harmony with their pets, and her dream is to open a force-free, fear-free training and boarding facility with an onsite co-operative care veterinary practice. After working in many different areas from offices, to cabin crew, to safari guide in Africa, Kelly has now completed her DipCABT (Coape) and is offering virtual consultations to help humans and their companions across the globe to build solid bonds that will last a lifetime.

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build these bonds, and they can only be curated and nurtured with time, care and effort.

The value of positive emotion is of lower value than negative emotion, so any single bad thing needs many positive things to counteract it. Again, if we think in human terms: if you bite into 50 apples, and the last one contains half a worm, how many bites will it take before you trust biting into an apple again? >

< There is a veritable plethora of evidence out there, based in science, that suggests force-free techniques produce better results than aversive methods and that aversive techniques negatively impact the welfare of animals – just a couple of these are shown below, but the list is long. The science of emotion, or affect, in the mammalian brain is complex, and different emotions are controlled in different areas of the brain with different neurotransmitters and connections. For example, the amygdala alone, which is a part of the limbic system, has areas that all play different roles in core emotions.

BUILDING TRUST

We could dig down into the neuroscience of emotions or the psychological and physiological impact that aversives have, but ultimately, for me, it comes down to trust. In order to build bonds that will cement your relationship with your companion, you can never give them a reason not to trust you.

Just one zap with an e-collar, one smack with a rolled-up newspaper or one squirt with a water spray is all it takes to break those bonds. People often argue that a squirt of water or a beep from a collar isn't going to hurt them. Physically, no, it probably won't. But will it break their trust? Will they want to come to you when you call them? Will they want to relinquish that fabulous sock they have just found in the bathroom? Will they feel totally calm and relaxed (and more importantly, safe) in your presence?

Trust and consistency are crucial elements in a force-free behaviour modification plan. If there is no trust or consistency, then the plan will not work.

An important element of force-free behaviour modification is ensuring that your dog is in the best possible state of mind and has all their physical and emotional needs met. Ensuring that your companion has everything they need for a happy, balanced life will greatly assist in preventing

negative feelings from occurring and will also promote the ability to learn. It is often these negative emotions that result in what we humans perceive to be 'problem behaviours'.

KIND HEARTED

In short, if you want to help your furry friend, help them with your whole heart. Commit to cementing those bonds and building a lifetime full of trust and love. You only need to watch how quickly a dog who has been removed from horrific circumstances becomes open to trusting again. It astounds me just how forgiving these amazing creatures are and how willing they are to put their faith in us humans. It doesn't take much – you just need to be kind. They don't understand in the same way that we do, and we can't explain to them in words why we are doing what we are doing. As the old saying goes, 'actions speak louder than words', and this is never truer than when we need to communicate with animals. ☺

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