

## One of the Most Humane Ways to Help Aggressive, Fearful Pets

If you love dogs and want yours to become a blessing and not a curse, you'd do well to heed the findings of this study. Add in these related tips to turn your dog into a compliant, well-adjusted companion you wouldn't dream of sending away. Because no one wants a bully living with them.

**Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker**

### STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- When we combine positive reinforcement training with fear free training for newly adopted shelter dogs, the likelihood those dogs will remain in their new homes increases dramatically
- Positive reinforcement training is much more effective than aversive training, and as a bonus, it also eliminates the potential for training-induced fear, anxiety and aggression in dogs
- Adding a fear free component to positive behavior training can prevent and alleviate fear, anxiety and stress, and improve pets' emotional well-being during veterinary visits and also at home

***Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published November 12, 2018.***

Dr. Marty Becker (no relation!), widely considered the father of the fear free movement, tells the story of Dr. Theresa DePorter, a board-certified veterinary behaviorist who was trying to convince a veterinary practice in the Detroit area to do positive-based, fear free training for new dog owners in the hospital.

For two years, DePorter compiled information on dogs adopted from a shelter and taken to a specific veterinary clinic. Based on client feedback, the dogs received either no training or aversive types of training. At the end of the two-year period, only 33 percent of those pets were still in their adoptive home. This meant 67 percent had been relinquished, presumably back to a shelter.

For the next two years, the veterinary clinic agreed to allow trainers to conduct positive reinforcement training sessions with a fear free component right in the hospital for newly adopted shelter dogs and their owners. At the end of the second two-year period, 93 percent of the dogs who went through the training were still in their adoptive homes. There are few better examples of the power of positive dog training that also involves fear free training than this one!

### **Aversive/Punitive Training (Punishment) Is Rarely Effective**

I think one of the most difficult concepts for dog parents to grasp when it comes to training their canine companion is that punishment is typically ineffective, and it's often counterproductive. In other words, you can make your dog's behavior worse using a punitive (aversive) approach. As veterinary behaviorist Dr. Valarie Tynes explains:

*“When punishment is used incorrectly, it will appear unpredictable and confusing, so many pets become anxious or fearful around the owner that administers the punishment. When punishment is used in an attempt to train an animal that is already afraid or anxious, [the] fear and anxiety are likely to worsen and may lead to aggression.”<sup>1</sup>*

According to Tynes, three important rules must be met for punishment (correction) to be effective:

1. The punishment must occur every time the unwanted behavior occurs
2. The punishment must be administered within a second or two of the inappropriate behavior
3. The punishment must be aversive enough to stop the dog from repeating the unwanted behavior in the future but not be so aversive as to frighten the dog

Unless your dog is physically tethered to you (e.g., you have him on a leash and the leash is attached to you in some manner), it will be extremely difficult to be on top of him when he misbehaves, and within a second or two of his mischief. In addition, in my experience it's the rare individual who can deliver “just enough” punishment to train a dog not to repeat the behavior without frightening him, or conversely, without teaching him to simply ignore verbal commands.

It's also worth noting that punitive tactics delivered repeatedly have a way of escalating, because the dog parent grows increasingly frustrated that the punishment isn't working. If the severity of the punishment increases, the dog may grow fearful of her owner, or a feistier dog may respond with growling or snapping.

Bottom line — it's easy to over-deliver or under-deliver punishment. If you allow anger into the equation, it can result in both physical and emotional harm to your dog. The flip side of the coin is punishment that's so wishy-washy and non-committal the dog learns to simply ignore you. As Tynes points out:

*“Meeting all three of these criteria can be difficult. That's why punishment often fails to solve behavior problems and should not be the first training method of choice. Positive reinforcement training, in which animals are rewarded for appropriate behaviors, is safer and more effective.”*

I absolutely agree with this, and can't stress strongly enough the importance of positive reinforcement behavior training, not only to help your dog become a good canine citizen, but also to preserve and protect the close and priceless bond you share with him.

## **An Example of Positive Versus Punitive Training**

Let's say your dog loves to snooze on your brand new, very expensive couch. When you find her there, you react by yelling and waving a rolled-up newspaper at her each time the behavior occurs. Your dog's response is to get off the couch when she's yelled at, only to return when you're not around. As Tynes points out, because she still gets on the couch when you're away, she's being rewarded some of the time for her undesirable behavior.

Remember rule No. 1 above? “The punishment must occur every time the unwanted behavior occurs.” It's simply not possible for you to be there to correct her each and every time she gets on your couch, so the punishment doesn't solve the problem long-term. Most dog parents are in a similar situation. We all lead busy lives, and it's just not possible to keep an eye on our dogs 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year.

Tynes suggests that a better approach to curbing your dog's couch surfing is to block her access to your furniture whenever she's home and unsupervised. A couple of options are crate training or confining her to another room in the house.

However, physically separating her from her beloved couch won't teach her to stay off it, so I would suggest the crate or the separate room only while you're helping her learn what to do instead of getting up on the furniture. Positive reinforcement behavior training is about showing your dog what you want her to do instead of the behavior you don't want her to do.

In this instance, you'll need both a deterrent and an alternative behavior to teach. An effective deterrent makes it uncomfortable for the dog to lie on the couch. Examples: a plastic cover over the couch (most dogs don't like plastic), or one of those rubber carpet runners with the spikey side up.

Teaching the alternative behavior involves placing a comfy dog bed close to the couch, encouraging her with treats to lie down in it, and rewarding her each time she does. Once the dog learns to associate discomfort with the couch, and a yummy treat with lying in her own bed, the couch-surfing behavior should be gradually extinguished.

## Positive Reinforcement Training in 5 Steps

The goal of positive reinforcement behavior training is to use very small-sized treats (pea-sized is good, and you can even use frozen peas if your dog seems to like them) and verbal praise and affection to encourage desired behaviors in your dog.

1. Come up with short, preferably one-word commands for the behaviors you want to teach your pet. Examples are Come, Sit, Stay, Down, Heel, Off, etc. Make sure all members of your family consistently use exactly the same command for each behavior.
2. As soon as your dog performs the desired behavior, reward him immediately with a treat and verbal praise. Do this every time he responds appropriately to a command. You want him to connect the behavior he performed with the treat. This of course means you'll need to have treats on you whenever you give your dog commands in the beginning.
3. Keep training sessions short and fun. You want your dog to associate good things with obeying your commands. You also want to use training time as an opportunity to deepen your bond with your pet.
4. Gradually back off the treats and use them only intermittently once your dog has learned a new behavior. Eventually they'll no longer be necessary, but you should always reward your dog with verbal praise whenever he obeys a command.
5. Continue to use positive reinforcement to maintain the behaviors you desire. Reward-based training helps create a range of desirable behaviors in your pet, which builds mutual feelings of trust and confidence.

If your dog is displaying undesirable behavior and you're not sure you can deal with it on your own, talk with your veterinarian, a **positive dog trainer** or a **veterinary behaviorist**.

# Adding Fear Free Training to Positive Behavior Training

Dr. Marty Becker founded the Fear Free Animal Trainer Program for dog trainers with a specific level of knowledge, education and experience. The program allows them to work with veterinary staffs "... to prevent and alleviate fear, anxiety and stress and improve an animal's emotional wellbeing during veterinary care and home care."<sup>2</sup>

Certified trainers possess the knowledge and skills to implement fear free strategies with their clients' pets at veterinary clinics, during puppy and kitten training classes, and in day-to-day training sessions at home. One of the most important services certified fear free trainers provide is preparing pets for veterinary appointments to ensure they have a stress-free, even enjoyable visit. You can find both fear free certified veterinary practices and individuals near you in the **Fear Free Pets Directory**.

There's also a wonderful program I recommend to all new parents of adopted or rescued dogs that helps them adjust to a new home in the least stressful manner. You can find it at **A Sound Beginning**, and you can immediately begin using the book's tips and tricks and the calming music CD on your dog's first day home.

## Sources and References

dvm360 July 31, 2018

<sup>1</sup> [dvm360 Handout - Punishment](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Fear Free Pets](#)

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