

What if Your Dog Drives You Crazy with These 2 Undesirable Behaviors?

It's easy to get annoyed and angry, but far more effective to handle it this way. It'll not only help your dog become a good canine citizen, but also preserve and protect the priceless bond you share with him. Highly adaptable to other problems too, as long as you apply this 2-part rule.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Training your dog using punishment is typically a losing proposition
- Punishment used incorrectly (which is almost always the case) can result in an anxious, fearful and even aggressive dog
- Positive reinforcement training teaches your dog an alternative, acceptable behavior to replace the undesirable behavior
- Humans aren't born knowing how to effectively train and communicate with dogs, so seek training advice before behaviors become a problem
- Address concerns about your pet's behavior with a professional skilled in addressing behavior issues positively

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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 punitive tactics**. 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."*¹

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, 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.

In other words, 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."

Positive reinforcement behavior training is highly important, 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.

Why Punishment Fails, Example No. 1 — Couch-Loving Dog

Tynes offers two examples of why punishment usually doesn't work. In the first, a dog who isn't allowed on the couch is routinely found there by her owner, who reacts by yelling and waving a rolled-up newspaper at the dog each time the behavior occurs.

The dog's response is to get off the couch when she's yelled at, only to return when her owner isn't around. As Tynes points out, because the dog still gets on the couch when the owner is 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." In this case, it's not possible for the couch-surfing canine's owner to be there to deliver punishment each and every time the behavior occurs, so the punishment doesn't solve the problem long-term.

The vast majority of dog parents are likely in a similar predicament. Most people lead busy lives, and it's simply not possible to keep an eye on the dog 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year.

In addition, 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.

Why Punishment Fails, Example No. 2 — Jumping Dog

In Tynes' second example, a dog greets people by jumping on them, and the owners' response is to either knee the dog in the chest or kick him when he does it to them. As a result, the dog now avoids the husband because the kicking has caused him to be fearful. However, he still jumps on everyone else. As Tynes explains:

"Many dogs are highly motivated to greet people by getting close to their faces. In most cases, kneeing or kicking such a dog is less powerful than the dog's desire to greet people by jumping on them."

This is good information that can further your understanding of your dog's motivation if he's also a "jump greeter." You know how some people greet everyone they meet with a big hug and a kiss? Seems there are dogs who are similarly inspired!

Back to the dog in the example — since not everyone he meets responds to his jumping with a knee or a kick (thank goodness), the punishment doesn't meet rule No. 2 above: "The punishment must be administered within a second or two of the inappropriate behavior."

It also doesn't meet rule No. 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."

According to Tynes, this dog doesn't always perceive kneeing as punishment, but rather often views it as reinforcement for his behavior because he's getting attention (negative though it may be).

A Better Approach to Reclaiming the Couch

In the first example of the couch-loving dog, Tynes suggests blocking the dog's access to the 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 the dog from her beloved couch won't teach her to stay off it, so it's suggested using the crate or the separate room only while her owner is 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, the owner will 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.

A Better Approach to Extinguishing Jumping Behavior

Kneeing a jumping dog or worse, kicking him as a form of punishment (or simply to keep him off you) is another example in which the dog isn't learning a more acceptable behavior to replace the unacceptable one. In addition, you can cause injury to the dog and/or yourself using your knee or foot against him.

And there's also the issue of unintentionally reinforcing the bad behavior because you're paying attention to him when he jumps. This dog needs a replacement behavior that is equally motivating. Tynes suggests **teaching him to sit** to greet everyone. Sitting becomes the alternative behavior that gets rewarded with petting and/or a food treat.

While he's being taught to sit to greet people, it's important to stop reacting when he jumps on you. Turn your back, stand straight and ignore him. This is the opposite of what he wants (attention) and sends the message that you don't welcome his exuberant jumping routine.

Positive Reinforcement Dog Training in 5 Simple 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**.

Sources and References

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¹ [dvm360 Handout - Punishment](#)
