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and supports dog owners*

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USING PUNISHMENT CORRECTLY

One way animals can learn is through operant conditioning. You read about this process in the Pamphlet for Pet Parents about positive reinforcement. Operant conditioning is based on behavior producing consequences. Your pet performs a behavior and either a positive or a negative consequence results from his behavior. If the consequence is pleasant (rewarding), the preceding behavior becomes more likely. If the consequence is unpleasant (aversive), the preceding behavior becomes less likely. Your pet learns that he can affect consequences with his behavior. We say that the use of reinforcement (pleasant consequences) increases behavior while the use of punishment (unpleasant consequences) decreases behavior. The use of punishment can be a very quick and lasting way to suppress behavior.

What Is Punishment?

Punishment is anything that causes your pet to suppress or stop his behavior. Many pet owners don't realize there are two types of punishment. The first is negative punishment which involves removing or withholding something your pet values to decrease unwanted behavior. To use negative punishment correctly, you must be able to control whatever it is that is reinforcing your dog's behavior.

Using negative punishment. For example, if your dog paws at you to get your attention, if you completely ignore him, or even get up and leave the room, you've negatively punished the pawing behavior. Pawing causes your dog to lose the chance to get attention from you.

A "time out" is another example of negative punishment. The correct term is "time out from reinforcement," which explains more about this technique. Let's say your cat becomes too excited and is racing around the living room and climbing the drapes. At that moment, the living room is a reinforcing place to be because your cat is having fun. If you remove your cat from the living room and confine her in a small bathroom for about 2 minutes, you've given her a "time out". You've removed her from the reinforcing environment to a location she doesn't want to be at that moment. If you were instead to put your cat outside, this would not be a time out because she could still race around the backyard and be reinforced.

Sometimes it may not be easy or practical to take your pet someplace else. If you are the source of the reinforcement, than you can remove yourself from your pet. As in the example above, if your dog

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Negative punishment involves taking away something of value to decrease unwanted behavior.

Ideally, punishment should occur when your pet starts the unwanted behavior.

paws at you for attention, get up and leave the room. If your cat bites you or claws you when playing, stop the play and walk away.

Removing your attention by turning your back to the animal, crossing your arms and looking at the ceiling or leaving, are all forms of negative punishment. Withholding a treat, a toy, food or a walk are other examples of negative punishment. Negative punishment is often the best, first choice to stop many unwanted behaviors.

Using positive punishment. The other type of punishment is positive punishment. Positive punishment involves giving the pet an unpleasant consequence when he displays an unwanted behavior. Squirt-ing your pet with water, sounding an airhorn, a verbal reprimand or spraying Spray Shield™ (a safe, dilute citronella oil) at your pet are some examples of positive punishment.

The choice of the punishment you use should be consistent with the behavior you want to suppress. The punishment should fit the crime, so to speak. For example, withholding the food dish when the dog is jumping for it or spraying the cat with water when he is jumping on the counter would be appropriate punishment, shocking or hitting your dog, cat or horse would not be. Pushing a dog down for jumping would seem to be a form of positive punishment yet some dogs do not interpret this as punishment but as a sort of rewarding rough play. Pets vary in what they find aversive. Some find being sprayed with water aversive while other enjoy it. Some pets find certain smells and noises aversive while others are not bothered at all. Some animals are very sensitive to pain while others have very high pain tolerances. To use punishment effectively, you need to know what your animal finds aversive.

Using Punishment Effectively

There are many rules that must be followed to use punishment effectively and humanely. We'll discuss three of the most important. These rules apply to negative punishment as well as positive punishment.

Use the right intensity. If you start out with a mild punishment and gradually increase the intensity, your pet adapts to and tolerates increasing levels of punishment. However, pets vary in pain tolerance and it can be difficult to know what level to start with. If you start out with a very loud verbal reprimand, your pet may not respond to a softer verbal reprimand. Start out with the highest level of punishment you think will be effective, but won't cause pain or fear.

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Start with the least aversive method that is reasonably expected to succeed.

Deliver the punishment immediately. In order for the animal to make the connection between the behavior and the punishment, the punishment needs to be timed to occur when the pet is just beginning to engage in the unwanted behavior. Punishment that doesn't catch the animal in the act of doing the unwanted behavior, only confuses the pet or punishes the wrong behavior. It will not stop the unwanted behavior. Catch him in the act or he'll never learn.

Be consistent. Every single instance of the unwanted behavior needs to be punished. If your pet is only punished every once in a while, he learns that sometimes nothing bad will happen and the behavior won't be completely suppressed. He'll gamble that he won't get punished.

In some cases you may want to choose an acceptable warning signal that precedes the punishment. If you want your dog to quit barking when someone comes to the door when you are at home but to keep barking when you are not home, a verbal signal such as 'No' or 'Stop' can be given prior to punishment. The dog will learn that once he hears this verbal reprimand, punishment is on its way. When you are not at home, the signal will not be present and neither will the punishment.

Some behaviors as jumping on the couch or raiding the trash should be suppressed all the time. In these cases you do not want to give a warning signal. Remote punishment works best as the pet perceives the punishment coming from the environment instead of from you.

Booby traps and alarms that are activated by the pet's behavior are examples of remote punishment. It is often difficult for people to meet these three criteria for successful punishment. If you cannot meet them, find another way to deal with the behavior, because delivering ineffective punishment is unfair to your pet and won't change his behavior.

When NOT to Use Punishment

Do not use positive punishment as your first choice to change your pet's behavior. Positive reinforcement (rewarding good behavior) and negative punishment are very effective ways to change most behaviors. Do not believe the myth that you must use punishment or intimidation to gain physical dominance over your pet. You do not need to use harsh treatment to control your animal and to create a strong, trusting bond. Do not use punishment if your pet is fearful, has separation anxiety, is aggressive or has compulsive behaviors. Punishment will only make these problems worse and more dangerous to the pet,

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yourself and others. Don't punish your animal when you are angry. It is unlikely to help and may make the problem worse or create other problems. Deal with your anger in other ways such as going outside and kicking a trash can.

When Is It Appropriate To Use Positive Punishment?

The least aversive method that is reasonably expected to succeed should be the method of choice. Negative punishment is recommended over positive punishment because it does not involve the delivery of aversive stimuli. If the unwanted behavior is life threatening to the pet or others (cat door dashing, neighbors complaining about barking dog) and all other methods have failed, then positive punishment such as an electric containment system or anti-bark collar can be considered. It is best to use these with the guidance of an experienced certified applied or veterinary behaviorist or other qualified behavior consultant. Once you have interrupted inappropriate behavior with punishment, you should teach your pet another behavior to do in that situation for which he can be rewarded.

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