

Behavior tips: *Changing your pet's behavior without punishment*

Punishment refers to either the addition of an aversive consequence (something unpleasant) to your pet (*positive punishment*), or the removal of a reinforcing stimulus (something desirable) from your pet (*negative punishment*). An example of positive punishment is hitting your pet for doing an unwanted behavior. An example of negative punishment is taking away your pet's toy when they are doing something you do not want them to.

In the past, punishment was the most popular method of training pets. Now, positive reinforcement or "punishment-free behavior modification" is recommended because data show that it is more effective at teaching new behaviours and changing old ones. Positive reinforcement is defined by rewarding your pet with something good to reinforce a behavior you want your pet to learn. An example of this is giving your pet a treat when he/she sits on command.

Not only has positive reinforcement been shown to improve your animal's welfare, it's more effective in training skills you want. Dogs trained with rewards (praise, food and/or play rewards) were shown to be more obedient than dogs trained with vocal and physical punishments. Dogs trained with punishment exhibited more anxiety as they were constantly on the lookout for their next punishment. Think about it – if you were being smacked all the time you would be anxious too! Anxiety interferes with learning, so your pet is even less likely to learn the behaviors you are trying to teach them if punishment is used.

Cats also do better with positive reinforcement than with punishment. Cats that are punished for unwanted behavior tend to be more aggressive, and cats were *less aggressive* towards their owners when their owners used positive reinforcement instead of punishment. Here are some specifics of how you can implement positive reinforcement and punishment-free behavior modification to get the best-behaved pup in town!

There are many methods that can be used for punishment-free behavior modification. Simple verbal reinforcement is often helpful, but the use of other rewards, such as treats, can expedite the process. A positive association should be developed between the request word ("sit") and the desired response (sitting) in a way your dog is excited to learn and feels encouraged and supported. An example of this would be calling your dog from across the yard using an encouraging tone of voice, and when he/she comes to you, you reward him/her with sufficient physical and verbal praise along with a treat! To condition your dog to a task, you can ask your dog to perform the task, e.g. sit, then immediately reward him/her when the behavior occurs. Patience and praise are key components to training your dog with punishment-free behavior modification to keep everyone's interest high! This method can also be applied to undesired behaviors, such as chewing on inappropriate objects, by telling your dog to "leave it" and then rewarding the dog with a treat as soon as the inappropriate object is ignored.

Varying treats throughout your training session maintains interest and willingness to work for a longer period of time. Whether you are beginning this training method with a young puppy or your older dog,

punishment-free behavior modification can help increase attentiveness in your pup. Providing treat variety and even occasionally allowing your dog to choose his/her reward (by offering various options) can help maintain your dog's motivation to learn. Finally, *playing with your dog following a training session* can help him/her remember things better and can further enhance your bond. So... get out there with some tasty treats and have fun training your pup!

Treats, affection, toys and play can be used for positive reinforcement in cats. Positive reinforcement can decrease aggression towards owners, individuals outside the home, and in multi cat households, compared to the use of punishment models. Furthermore, positive reinforcement enhances the human-animal bond, decreases signs of stress in cats, and allows cats to learn novel and previously frightening tasks quicker than in comparison to other learning methods.

A common behavioral problem in cats is fear and aggression during transportation or during visits to the vet. Positive reinforcement has been shown to meditate this issue related to carrier-based fear. The key to positive reinforcement success is to take small steps especially if previous fear is involved. This allows for a washing out

period that allows the pet to form neutral associations with the behavior or object before they make positive associations. Going too fast or pushing an animal too hard is the number one reason positive reinforcement fails. If you have a cat who fears his/her carrier, you can start by getting him/her near the carrier during play or by giving treats nearby. You then provide these rewards on top of it, and eventually move the treats to the inside of the carrier. When the cat goes into the carrier willingly and happily time and again, gradually shut and then lock the door. Always providing a reward either during or after the cat enters the crate, as this is key to forming positive associations. Eventually you and your cat can practice this in a parked car and then a moving car, so that transportation to the vet is viewed as an enjoyable activity.

If your cat is eating your plants you can use a verbal request to ask her to stop, and as soon as she does, give her a treat. If you do this all the time and continue to reward cats for only desirable behaviours – those are the ones they will offer you.

Although these tips are helpful, please discuss any behavioural/medical concerns with your local veterinarian. For all cases where you still have concerns, seek specialist services (www.dacvb.org). At AVC you can contact the AVC Behavioural Medicine Service (AVCBehaviouralMed@upe.ca).

References: Affenzeller N et al. 2016. Playful activity post-learning improves training performance in Labrador Retriever dogs (*Canis lupus familiaris*). <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0031938416303626>; Bremhorst A et al. 2018. Incentive motivation in pet dogs - preference for constant vs varied food rewards. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6021384/>; China L et al. 2020. Efficacy of dog training with and without remote ELECTRONIC Collars vs. a focus on positive reinforcement. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7387681/>; O'Hanley KA et al. 2021. Risk factors for aggression in adult cats that were fostered through a shelter program as kittens." AABS 236: 105251; Pratsch L et al. 2018. Carrier training cats reduces stress on transport to a veterinary practice. AABS 206:64-74; Willson EK et al. 2017. Comparison of positive reinforcement training in cats: A pilot study. J Vet Behav <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jveb.2017.07.007>.

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