Behaviour Tips: *Why punishment is neither training nor behavioural modification and what you can do instead*

This Tips sheet will help you to understand why your veterinary team does not recommend punishment when training dogs (or cats) or when implementing behavioural modification.

What is punishment?
Punishment is a technique used to **decrease** the chance that a certain behaviour will occur again in the future. There are two main categories of punishment: positive punishment and negative punishment.

(+++) Positive punishment is when an **aversive** training method is **added** to some interaction to reduce the likelihood of a behaviour. Positive punishment can be anything such as a tug on a leadto get a dog to stop sniffing a tree, or as aversive as using electric shock (e-collars, e-stim) when the dog does something unwanted (jumping up). This training method is also commonly used in cat training: cats are often sprayed with water when they are "misbehaving". Positive punishment is not an appropriate training method for any animal for 2 main reasons: (1) It routinely causes fear or pain. (2) When it succeeds in stopping the behaviour you wanted to suppress, it also stops other normal and desired behaviors. Finally, dogs who are forcefully and physically punished for aggression become more aggressive and less reliable, and people are more likely to euthanize them when they worsen.

(- - -) Negative punishment is when you take something **away** that the individual **likes,** in order to reduce the likelihood of repeating an undesired behaviour. An example of this is when your cat or dog is playing with a toy that makes a lot of noise, and you take it away. This form of training gives no information to the animal about what the owner wants from them. Negative punishment, alone, is not an appropriate training method for any animal because it can cause considerable anxiety, unless you couple it to positive reinforcement for the behaviours you want.

Why is Punishment **NOT** recommended?
Even though punishment is considered to be the most common method of training, it is the least recommended by veterinary professionals. This is because punishment can be damaging to the bond between humans and dogs and cats, and ultimately cause distrust and resistance to training. Punished animals are typically more anxious than unpunished animals because of the concern that punishment may come from any behaviour. When punished, animals can be seen being restless, crouching, and yawning. These are all signs of acute stress, and when repeated can lead to a decrease in the welfare of the pet and increased chances of fear-based aggression in the future.

(+++)Positive reinforcement is a technique which involves the use of **adding (+++) good** rewards when a desired behaviour is demonstrated. This **increases** the likelihood that the behaviour will be repeated. An example of positive reinforcement is giving your pet a treat when they urinate in a desired location, such as outside or in a litter-box. Positive reinforcement can be applied by using many different kinds of rewards, such as treats, a toy, attention, or phrases such as "good boy!".

In order for positive reinforcement to be effective, the pet/learner must receive the reward immediately after the behaviour is demonstrated. This allows for proper association between the behaviour with the reward.

Why is Positive Reinforcement Recommended?
Positive reinforcement is recommended as it has extensive evidence based logic that spans across multiple disciplines, including human psychology. Significant evidence shows positive reinforcement is the most efficacious way to train any desired behaviour, while also being the least harmful. Positive reinforcement has also been shown to increase the human-pet bond, as pets enjoy learning and being treated by their owners!

(- - -) Negative reinforcement is different from positive reinforcement, as the reward is delivered in the form of taking something **bad away (- - -)**. An example of negative reinforcement is a pinch collar. The reward occurs when the dog stops pulling (desired behaviour), and is negative as the pain of the collar is taken away. *Negative reinforcement of this nature should be avoided, as it can result in fear of the situation*, such as a dog who develops a fear of collars. In this example, the fear can become so intense that it results in fear-based aggression towards anyone who comes close to the dog's neck/head.

Positive Reinforcement 101:
Training is possible whether your pet is young or old, and continues throughout their life. It is important to note that not all animals learn the same way, nor do they learn at the same speed. Remember to be patient with your pet and yourself. Training your pet is like riding a rollercoaster. Some days you will feel like you've mastered everything, while other days, it will appear as if that task is foreign to your pet.

Requirements for positive reinforcement training are the following:

The Reward: Reward options are endless. The reward for your pet depends on what they desire most.

- ***Treats:*** if your pet is food-motivated, treats are an excellent source for rewarding your pet. Remember that you do not want your pet to gain too much weight. Talk to your vet about preventing this while still allowing you to reward your pet with treats. There are endless low calorie options to explore!
- ***Toys:*** If your dog loves a good game of tug or playing with a toy, this is a great option. A quick tip for this tool is to make sure you use a special toy for training purposes. When using a special toy, your pet will be more eager to cooperate and learn than they would with their everyday toy.

The Marker: You always want to reward your pet when they exhibit the desired behaviour, BUT it is equally as important to **mark the behaviour** when rewarding so your pet can learn what is needed to get another reward. Your marker options are:

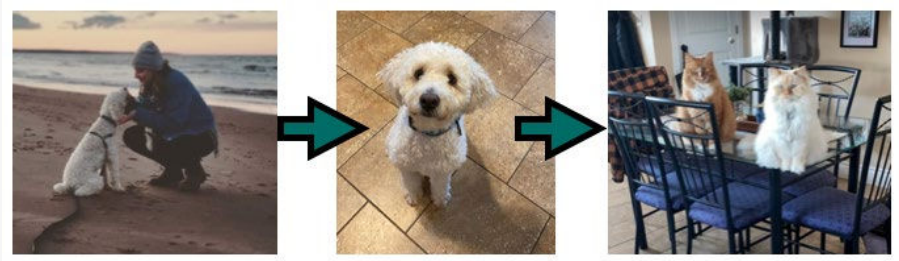
- ***Praise:*** Some dogs thrive on praise from their people, which can be a great alternative if treats or toys aren't an option for your pet. You can also do this in addition to using treats or toys. Ensure that this form of praise is different from the typical affection you would provide to your pet if they are in a training session/doing a specific task asked.
- ***Clicker:*** A clicker is a small handheld device that you can purchase at a pet store, and makes a distinct click noise. The Clicker allows you to mark a behaviour immediately as it happens. When starting with this tool, it is important to "charge it" (Click -> treat -> repeat x10); this teaches your pet that the click noise indicates something good is coming! Remember ALWAYS reward when you click, even if it is by accident. You don't want to confuse your pet with the meaning of the tool.
- ***Verbal cues:*** Using a specific word to mark the behaviour can be used ("YES!"). It is essential to use the same word and try to say it in the same manner every time as much as possible. This method is used the same way as the Clicker.

Duration:

- Keep your training sessions short and sweet, typically maximum 10-minute intervals. Every pet is different, so the duration your pet will last for your training sessions truly depends on your pet. ALWAYS end training sessions on a good note. Ask them to do a task that they have mastered and reward.

If you require help or more assistance in training, ***contact your local trainer who uses positive training methods****.*

SUCCESS STORY:



Murray was adopted from a shelter where he exhibited fear and anxiety towards humans and most noises/situations. Through the use of positive reinforcement, he was rewarded with treats for calm sitting, eye contact, and other desired behaviors. As a result, Murray has successfully learned to trust his new owner and look to her for guidance. He now eagerly anticipates and accepts treats for good behavior and learning. Through observation of this successful positive reinforcement, his housemates Bailey and Bella have learned to sit for treats as well!

References:

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