

A word on punishment

Many people might think they only use positive reinforcement, but punishment can encompass anything from tapping a dog on the nose, telling it “NO”, yelling, hitting, throwing noisy objects near it, yanking on the leash, grabbing it by the collar, using a spray bottle or more aversive and cruel items such as shock collars.

As we have discussed already, most problematic behaviours in greyhounds are founded in fear, anxiety and the uncertainty of a novel environment. This is likely due in part to genetics, but mainly a lack of early and appropriate socialisation to the domestic environment. For many paddock raised, non-chasers, this includes people as well!

Therefore, they often come to us with a lack of understanding of what is required of them from us. They do amazingly well considering, but they do have to learn to interpret the body postures, actions, words and wants of their new owner whilst simultaneously trying to get used to life in the suburbs. Other dogs get the opportunity to do this much earlier in life.

A lack of understanding of what the owner wants and communication inconsistencies in how owners respond, including random punishment can lead to conflict anxiety and uncertainty in all dogs, but particularly greyhounds.

It is totally incorrect and cruel to suggest that these dogs require firmer leadership or a spritz of water in the face, or heaven forbid as we heard recently, a bucket of water on the head! Anxious greyhounds are already worried about the world, and instead of listening to them and protecting them, we just go and prove them right! Yep, bad things do happen.

Punishment does not give our pets any information about what to do, only what not to do. There are more ways to get something wrong than right, thus punishment is also a very ineffective training tool.

Punishment results in a negative emotional state, leading to an increase in anxiety and possibly resulting in aggression towards family members in a variety of situations. It can also result in fear generalisation and inhibit learning.

What about gentle punishment, spray bottles or a tap across the muzzle?

- It's not effective; if it were you probably wouldn't be reading this
- Thus it tends to be repeated, causing uncertainty, fear and emotional distress for the pet. The people they should trust risk becoming viewed as something scary, and unpredictable
- The initial interruption to the unwanted behaviour means owners may be more likely to use this technique in other contexts. Punishment is thus very reinforcing for the owner! However, punishment in any form does not result in long term change in the behaviour or stop the initiation of the behaviour sequence
- Habituation to gentle punishment may lead to harsher punishment
- Interaction with the owner during the process of punishment may inadvertently lead to reinforcement of the behaviour; the exact opposite of what the owner wanted to achieve.

In summary

If people do not ignore good behaviour and instead always reward it, the issue of punishment becomes redundant. Neither engagement in abusive behaviour (positive punishment) nor ignoring all behaviours (negative punishment) are helpful for changing behaviour. Reward the good and desired behaviour, which helps to strengthen the bond between our pet and us. Don't forget to tell them they are wonderful when they are doing something you like.

Providing this information really helps our anxious pets because they do not need to offer up a huge variety of different behaviours to find the ones that we find acceptable. Tell them what to do (treats and praise) not just what not to do (punishment).

Remember, if your pet is already reacting, it is no longer able to engage, listen or learn. Punishment will only increase its reactivity and learn that people cannot be relied on to keep them safe. Just remove your pet from the situation as quickly and calmly as possible. If it's dog reactive, don't just muzzle up and keep on charging ahead in the hope it will habituate....it won't, it will just get worse.

Conversely, when your pet is laying calmly on a mat, reward them with a whispered "good dog". Or if they are otherwise engaged in desirable behaviour, tell them they are wonderful and give them a yummy treat or a gentle pat.

And finally, research has shown that animals learn best when we use clear signalling, positive rewards and are predictable in our behaviour.