



WHY PUNISHMENT DOESN'T WORK

The use of punishment can have many negative effects on your dog, including:

- Increasing the dogs fear or anxiety about the situation in which it is used
- Decreasing the dog's ability to learn
- Associating other, coincidental events with a fear provoking event
- Inhibiting behaviour, but leave the underlying problem unchanged increasing the chance of future problems
- Creating new behaviour problems
- Causing confusion as to which behaviour is required
- Causing physical injury

Increasing Fear and Anxiety

When a dog shows aggression to something that is perceived as a threat and you apply a punishment the dog may temporarily cease the aggressive behaviour, however it is likely that next time the same situation arises the dog's aggression will escalate. Because people often look for 'instant fixes' this approach may look like a cure, and appear impressive on TV, but it does not resolve the cause of the original behaviour. The dog remains fearful of the original perceived threat and will now be worried about what their owner will do to them. For example, if you are scared of spiders, you will try to avoid close contact with them. Imagine that someone dragged you up to a spider and held you there until you stopped struggling - would you feel any different about spiders? Or would you now be worried about spiders and by the presence of the person who tried to 'cure' you?

Stress and Learning

Using punishment based techniques to change behaviour is frequently counterproductive. There is a complex relationship between physiological stress responses and learning ability, stress actually inhibits the ability of animals to learn.

Risk of the Dog Associating the Punishment with Something Else

There is a real danger of an unwanted association being made between an unpleasant punishment such as a choke chain and some coincidental stimuli, such as the presence of a person or other animal.

Even when a dog is 'caught in the act' and punished, he or she may still not associate the punishment with the undesirable behaviour. This is commonly seen, for example, when puppies are smacked by owners for toileting indoors: they don't associate this with where they are peeing, but instead with the presence of the owner, so simply find a place to pee away from the owner rather than learning to go outside.

Increasing Aggression and Risk to Owners

Another drawback of the use of harsh punishment in training dogs is the risk of eliciting or worsening aggression. For example, puppies that are trained using punishment based approaches will have an increased risk of being fearful of hand movement as adults, and have an increased risk of biting. Owners should be particularly cautious of using confrontational or punitive techniques with dogs that have an established aggressive response. Aggression develops as a response to perceived threat either to itself or a valued resource. However, once established, dogs will often have a strong expectation that their aggressive behaviour will be successful to avoid the perceived threat. Trying to stop or interrupt such a response has a high risk that the dog will show an increased level of aggression.

Confusion as to Which Behaviour is Required

Imagine that you needed to learn a new behaviour as a new employee, but in order to teach you this behaviour, your new colleagues only shouted at you when you did the wrong thing. You might try a whole range of different possible responses, but may never identify the exact thing that they wanted you to do. Where owners rely mainly on punishment for inappropriate behaviours, it is very difficult for a dog to work out what it is supposed to do. As would also happen to you in your work-place, dogs will tend to either end up becoming very frustrated and showing aggression, or give up entirely and stop trying any behaviours at all.

Risk of Physical Injury

There is also an increased risk of physical injury to the dog where harsh handling is used. Choke/check chains and prong collars can result in laryngeal, esophageal, thyroidal, and tracheal damage.

All of the large UK animal rescue organisations use positive reinforcement training methods to train and rehabilitate their dogs as they have seen first-hand the disastrous results of the wrong type of training on the dogs in their care. It does beg the questions...that is there are alternative training techniques that do not run the risk of making the behaviour worse, ruining the dog owner relationship and do not compromise the dog's welfare then why chose punishment?