

Behavior Modification - Why Punishment Should be Avoided

Can I punish my pet for undesired behaviors?

While punishment can be effective at decreasing those behaviors that are undesirable, if it is not administered properly it can aggravate existing problems and cause new ones. Positive punishment (the application of unpleasant stimulus) is intended to decrease a behavior and NOT to discipline the pet. It must be administered while the behavior occurs, and ideally just as it starts. The punishment must be sufficient to deter the behavior and must be timed so that it coincides with the behavior.

"Punishment that is painful is inhumane and can only be justified when safety is an immediate issue."

Once the behavior ceases, punishment is inappropriate and unwarranted since it will more likely cause the pet to associate the punishment with whatever it is doing at the time and is unlikely to be associated with an act that has occurred in the past. Punishment that is painful is inhumane and can only be justified when safety is an immediate issue. Punishment directed at the pet by humans should generally be avoided. On the other hand, punishment in the form of booby traps or avoidance devices that lead to unpleasant outcomes may be effective if they occur each time the pet attempts the behavior and are not associated with the owner's presence. In effect, the pet becomes fearful of repeating the behavior or entering an area and either ceases the behavior or avoids the area altogether. For further information, see our handout on [using punishment effectively](#), and review the punishment guidelines published by the American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior at www.avsabonline.org.

Why does my pet act guilty?

"Pets may act guilty if they can predict when you are about to administer punishment."

Pets may act guilty if they can predict when you are about to administer punishment. The guilty look is an indication that the pet knows that it is about to be punished, but not an acknowledgement that it knows that it did something that you consider wrong! A pet may act guilty (fearful, submissive) because of your tone of voice, your postures or your actions. Pets may also act guilty if they have learned which situations lead to punishment. For example, if your pet learns that whenever you walk into a room where the rug has been soiled or where damage has been done, that you turn into a dangerous person, it will soon learn to avoid you or act guilty in similar situations. However, this



does not teach your pet that the behavior of chewing or soiling is undesirable, since at the time of chewing or soiling there were no unpleasant consequences (and in fact from the pet's perspective the act was likely pleasant or necessary). It would take reasoning ability and human language skills far beyond those of any pet to learn that something you are punishing now was for an act that took place minutes or hours ago. In fact, if your pet has been punished for soiling or destructiveness, it would not be unusual for your pet to "act guilty" if you come across a soiling or damage that is several days old, or was done by another pet in the home.

Punishment stops my pet's misbehavior - why can't I use it?

When you administer punishment it only serves to stop the behavior when you are present. In fact, the pet may quickly learn that when you are not present the behavior does not lead to punishment and will soon learn to stop when you are watching and continue when you are not watching. Some pets see punishment as a form of attention, which actually reinforces the undesirable behavior. Another serious concern is that if physical punishment is used (hitting, pinning, rolling over, or grabbing the pet's collar) it may cause undue discomfort and increase the pet's level of fear when approached in a similar manner in the future.

"Pets may become confused or conflicted if they cannot determine whether the approaching hand represents a friendly gesture or another incident of punishment."

This is especially true for cats where any form of punishment by humans, could increase fear of people. Another problem is that pets may become confused or conflicted if they cannot determine whether the approaching hand represents a friendly gesture or another incident of punishment. Pets should always consider the approaching hand to be a positive gesture (petting, treats or play) - the hand is a friend.

Can punishment be used for training?

"Punishment may teach a pet that something is unpleasant but it does not teach the pet what is desirable."

Punishment may teach a pet that something is unpleasant but it does not teach the pet what is desirable. Training should focus on reinforcing what is desirable and not punishing what is undesirable. While reinforcement can increase behaviors that we want to train, punishment can only decrease behaviors that we want to stop.

Does punishment help to show the dog who is in charge?

Punishment may stop a behavior and may make the pet less likely to repeat the behavior in the future. However, even if punishment is sufficiently unpleasant for the pet to stop the behavior in the presence of one or more family members (or with a trainer), the pet may become defensive and aggressive if the same type of punishment or handling is applied by others (fight or flight). In fact, some pets will (understandably) be defensive and aggressive to anyone who raises their voice or tries to physically punish.

If I shouldn't punish my pet, how do I stop undesirable behavior?



While punishment may be successful at stopping a behavior when you are present, it does nothing to stop the behaviors when you are not present.

"Most important, punishment does nothing to help the pet learn the proper way to behave in the situation."

Most important, punishment does nothing to help the pet learn the proper way to behave in the situation. Training should focus on teaching the pet the desirable response, rather than punishing what is undesirable. If you see your pet engaging in an unwanted behavior, distraction (perhaps with a loud noise, hand clapping or a

"no") and redirection to a more appropriate behavior is the best intervention. Most unwanted behaviors occur because the pet is not supervised properly and has the opportunity to engage in the behavior or because the pet is anxious. For further information, see our handouts on [reinforcement](#) and [training](#).

Can punishment cause behavior problems?

Many behavior problems are caused by inappropriate or excessive punishment. In fact, a positive situation can be turned into one that is negative and unpleasant simply by punishing the dog. For example if the dog is punished when it barks at visitors to your home or people that pass by your property, it may become increasingly fearful of new visitors and passersby.

"In short, many times when we punish our pets for behaviors we find undesirable we make them more fearful of the situation or of the people or pets it meets at future greetings."

If the dog pulls or lunges forward when it meets new people or other dogs on the street, punishment (in an attempt to stop the behavior) may make the pet more fearful of each new person or dog that it meets. Similarly if the pet is punished when it starts to investigate a new baby, either by verbal or physical corrections (positive punishment) or by removing it from the room (negative punishment), it is likely to make negative associations with the baby. In short, many times when we punish our pets for behaviors we find undesirable we make them more fearful of the situation or of the people or pets it meets at future greetings.

Another possible outcome of punishment is that some pets become confused, and may begin to exhibit unusual behaviors such as spinning, tail chasing, chewing or licking themselves or loss of urine control. These behaviors, known as displacement behaviors arise when pets are in a state of conflict. This might occur if your responses to your pet are inconsistent. For example, if some greetings and attention-seeking behavior are encouraged but others are punished, then your pet may be conflicted as to whether or not to approach. Be consistent. Teach your pet proper greeting behaviors and what behaviors earn attention (see our handout on [predictable rewards](#) and [learn to earn](#)).

Can punishment be used to correct behavior problems?

Punishment should not be used to correct undesirable behavior.

"Punishment focuses on stopping the undesirable but does not teach what is desirable."

Some pets may see it as a form of reinforcement, while others will become increasingly more fearful or aggressive. Punishment focuses on stopping the undesirable but does not teach what is desirable. For example, if the pet barks, lunges or is aggressive toward children, dogs or strangers, punishment only serves to make the pet increasingly more fearful and anxious each time it is exposed to a child, dog or stranger. On the other hand, calming the pet and reinforcing the desirable behavior (such as sit and focus on the owners) teaches the pet how to behave in the situation and that each new exposure might have a positive outcome. For further information, see our handouts on [behavior modification](#).

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