



DOG TRAINING

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OUCH! THE SHOCKING TRUTH ABOUT ELECTRONIC COLLARS

In my opinion it is NEVER appropriate to use electric shock to train a dog or any other living thing. There are far better ways to train, with far fewer serious side effects. However, since there are people advocating the use of shock collars, without fully understanding their dangerous side-effects, or perhaps not caring about the physical and emotional pain they inflict on dogs, I feel compelled to explain why shock collars should be relegated to the dust bins of history along with other instruments of torture, such as the rack and thumb screws.

There are three basic types of shock collars; underground fence collars which automatically administer a shock as the dog crosses a line in the yard, bark collars which automatically trigger when the dog barks, and remote activated collars where a person presses a button on a transmitter in order to shock the dog. In all cases, the dog wears a collar which contains a box with two electrodes that press against the neck. When the collar is triggered, the dog is shocked via the electrodes. Some who use shock collars for training competition dogs will even place a second collar around the dog's waist so the electrodes shock the genitals. This is allegedly necessary because a shock around the neck is not enough.

From the perspective of operant conditioning, these collars are usually used as a form of positive punishment (the dog is shocked for doing something the person does not want), but may also be used for negative reinforcement (the dog is continuously shocked until the dog does what the person wants). While both methods are inhumane, the latter is especially cruel and counterproductive.

Even though the manufacturers and advocates of shock collars may tell you that the shock is nothing more than a tingle, we know from the science of operant conditioning that the aversive stimulus (shock) must be sufficiently aversive (i.e. painful) in order to work. I have seen dogs with severe burns on their necks caused by these collars, in which case the pain lasts long after the shock.

It is important to remember that along with the physical pain of every shock is the emotional trauma and anxiety that comes with it. Imagine your high school algebra teacher shocking you every time you answered a question incorrectly. Would you become anxious? Would you become so anxious you would stop learning? Anxiety never helps learning in any species.

The anxiety and pain the dog feels are often associated with whatever the dog was focusing on at that instant. The use of positive punishment in the form of choke collars, prong collars and shock collars can cause aggression. Both cases below are descriptions of how using the shock collar caused aggression. These people sought me out for advice, after the aggression developed.

Case #1

A happy, gregarious dog, whom I will call "Jake", loved every person he saw. Jake's guardian was concerned about him leaving the yard because he frequently went to visit the neighbor. For what they believed was his protection, they installed an underground fence system that would shock Jake several feet before he was outside of his yard. They trained him to the system per the manufacturer's instructions. A few weeks after the system was installed Jake saw the neighbor out in her yard. Since Jake had always liked his neighbor he ran straight for her, focused on his human friend when ZAP! He felt a sharp stinging pain around his neck. This happened a few more times, the once friendly Jake always getting shocked as he ran towards someone he thought was his friend. Then one day the neighbor knocked on the front door. Jake saw the neighbor and he bit her in the leg, before she could cause him pain.

Case #2

A young dog, we will call her Jenny, drags its guardians around on leash, especially when it sees another dog. Jenny is curious and friendly and wants to meet the other dogs. The guardians are older, Jenny is big and they do not enjoy being dragged around every time the dog sees another dog. They have made no attempt to train Jenny, but are frustrated. They go to a pet store where some kid, who knows nothing about canine behavior, sells them a remote shock collar. They are instructed to shock Jenny whenever she pulls on leash. On their next walk Jenny does as she always does, she sees another dog and lunges forward in friendly greeting. Fixated on the dog she wants to greet when ZAP! Jenny yelps in pain, not sure what has happened. The next time Jenny sees a dog on a walk she immediately becomes anxious, remembering the pain she felt the last time she saw a dog. As the dog approaches Jenny lunges but this time she also growls and shows her teeth. Jenny is very afraid but is trying to look fierce to scare the dog away before it hurts her again when ZAP! Jenny again yelps in pain. She is anxious and confused why this other dog would hurt her.

Jenny's guardians have not trained her to stop pulling; all they have done is made a good dog, dog aggressive. If these people would have enrolled Jenny in a training class they could have taught her to walk nicely without ever causing her any pain or fear.

Why did Jake and Jenny become aggressive? Because they associated the pain and anxiety of the electric shock with what they were focusing on at the time the shock occurred. In Jake's case the neighbor, in Jenny's case, other dogs. To Jake the neighbor was the predictor of the shock, and he took action in an attempt to prevent the shock. Are these one of a kind incidents? Far from it. I have training colleagues throughout the country that could tell you of similar incidents. These incidents could have been prevented with the installation of a good, old fashioned fence or providing Jake with supervision when leaving him in an unfenced yard. We would not leave a 4 year old child alone in an unfenced yard, why leave a dog?

Jenny's situation could have been prevented with a training class and the use of a Gentle Leader or K9 Freedom Harness.

Proponents of shock collars insist they are necessary because harsh punishment is the only way a dog can be trained. To me this says more about their lack of ability as a trainer than anything else.

One of the typical examples they use is training a dog to stay away from rattlesnakes. They insist the only way you can teach a dog to stay away from snakes is by shocking them whenever they approach a snake. Now from the examples above, it should be clear that shocking a dog when they see a snake is just as likely to teach the dog to attack it as it is to stay away.

When they bring up this example, I like to ask how they would teach a 4 year old child to stay away from rattlesnakes. After lots of mumbling and posturing they agree that the intelligent and responsible thing to do would be to hold on to the child's hand and keep them close when in snake country. I then ask if they think it would be appropriate to put a shock collar on a 4 year old child to keep them in the yard. Even they know that if they tried to use a shock collar on a child they would end up having the child taken away and they would spend time in prison.

While I am the first to caution people about treating their dog as if it were a child, I do think we should treat children and pets with the same respect and compassion. There is NEVER a need to teach or train with techniques and devices that are designed to cause physical and emotional pain.

There is NEVER a reason to use electric shock to train a dog.

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