

Training Philosophy for Deborah Jay DeSilva, CPDT-KA, MA

Definition of Force-Free

My training philosophy, approach and methods do not include shock, pain, choking, fear, and/or physical compulsion to manage, care for or train dogs. Devices used to choke, prong, and/or shock pets are unacceptable and counterproductive in training. This includes “pet correction devices” or aversive stimuli intended for pet care, management, or training by eliciting a “startle response,” and/or an alarm reaction to prevent, barking, jumping up, growling or any other problematic behavior.

Ramirez-Moreno and Sejnowski (2012) define the startle response as a “largely unconscious defensive response to sudden or threatening stimuli, such as sudden noise or sharp movement” that is “associated with negative affect.” According to Lang, Bradley, and Cuthbert (1990), the startle response (or aversive reflex) is “enhanced during a fear state and is diminished in a pleasant emotional context.” As such, the use of the startle response to be a management technique that uses fear as the motivation. Direct consequences can include:

1. Infliction of Stress and Pain

Any stimulus not paired with a positive stimulus is, at best, neutral and, at worst, frightening and/or painful to the dog. Dogs who learn to exhibit behaviors to escape or avoid fear or pain are by definition being subjected to an aversive stimulus. (Aversive means something unpleasant or frightening that the dog seeks to avoid or escape, as opposed to a pleasant stimulus that a dog seeks out voluntarily.)

2. Escalation

If a change in behavior is not seen immediately, users of aversive tools may opt to increase the frequency, duration or intensity of the application. Unfortunately, this can only result in the pet attempting to escape or avoid the stimulus with even greater intensity. This creates a counterproductive paradigm whereby the pet simply learns to fear the stimulus, the context, and/or the person delivering it. In addition, some dogs tend to be “stoic” and may fail to show any kind of fear response, irrespective of increased levels of anxiety or frustration. There is also the risk that dogs may become habituated to the sense of fear or anxiety, once again causing the trainer or owner to increase the level and/or frequency of the aversive stimulus. It has been scientifically proven that fear and stress caused in such situations can have a significant effect on a dog's well-being due to increasing cortisol levels and heart rate, not to mention the psychological impact. (O’Heare, 2005).

3. Global Suppression, or “Shut-Down”

A dog repeatedly subjected to aversive stimulation may go into a state of “shut down,” or a global suppression of behavior. This is frequently mistaken for a “trained” dog, as the dog remains subdued and offers few or no behaviors. In extreme cases, dogs may refuse to perform any behavior at all, known as “learned helplessness.” In such cases, dogs may try to isolate themselves to avoid incurring the aversive stimulation. This is evidently counterproductive to training new, more acceptable behaviors. (O’Heare, 2011).

4. Suppressed Aggression

The use of aversive stimuli is counter-indicated in dogs with aggression. This is because the behavior may only be suppressed rather than extinguished, and may thus resurface at any time without warning, generally in a more severe display. Using aversive stimuli to reduce behaviors such as barking, lunging and growling may suppress signals that warn of a more serious, and potentially imminent behavior, such as biting. Without ritualized aggression behaviors, people and other pets will receive no warning before the dog subjected to punishment feels forced to resort to biting. Rather, desensitization and counterconditioning are the only ethical and effective paradigms in which to treat aggression in dogs. Protocols such as these help positively impact the dog's emotional state from one of fear and/or anxiety to one that is more happy and relaxed, and thus able to learn new behaviors.

5. Redirected Aggression

Dogs subjected to repeated aversive stimulation may be conditioned to associate the fear and/or pain with certain contextual cues in their environment. As an example, using an aversive sound such as an air horn to interrupt barking risks pairing the owner or trainer with the unpleasant stimulus and, in particular, the hand or arm that is reaching out while using the tool. Repeated instances may generalize to the dog that he must attempt to flee. If the dog feels, however, that flight is not possible or a safe or reliable course of action, he may instead start acting aggressively toward any arm or hand movement, or approach behavior whatsoever.

6. Generalization

For new, more appropriate behaviors to become reliable in random environments, they must be accessed, reinforced and then practiced so a dog is able to transfer them to any context or situation (known as “generalization”). When using so-called dog correction devices or aversive stimuli to train or manage a dog, the dog must be repeatedly subjected to the aversive stimulus for the behavior to appear resolved, when it is in fact only suppressed. In such cases, the dog still has not learned a more appropriate alternative behavior. In addition, as the dog is most likely still experiencing a negative emotional state, such as fear or anxiety, he is susceptible to even more problematic behavior fallout.

The Force-Free Method

As a Certified Professional Dog Trainer – Knowledge Assessed (CPDT-KA), Evaluator for A.K.C. S.T.A.R. Puppy, Canine Good Citizen (CGC), and Trick Dog titles, Therapy Dog trainer and evaluator, Evaluator for the Pet Professional Guild's (PPG) Pet Ambassador Program, and a member of both the Association of Professional Dog Trainers (APDT) and the International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants (IAABC), I advocate only the use of positive operant and respondent training methods, both personally and professionally, and that all training should be conducted in a manner that encourages pets to enjoy the process, which will, in turn, lead them to become more confident and well-adjusted pets. I practice and promote only scientifically researched methods of training and behavior modification that are the least intrusive and most effective in my practice. This document is in agreement with the *Pet Professional Guild Position Statement on Pet Correction Devices*.

Bibliography

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