

Your Smart Dog Why Do We Punish? February 2010

I just returned from Clicker Expo – the premier canine behavior and training conference – in Portland, OR, and my head is swimming with all the fascinating ideas I heard. Clicker Expo 2010 has sparked many ideas and you’ll see them in upcoming newsletters. One single talk has my brain working overtime: it was Karen Pryor’s talk *Punishment and the Public*.

Clicker Expo is the brainchild of Karen Pryor. A dolphin trainer in the 60’s, she’s now the face of modern dog-friendly training. She penned what some consider the holy grail of dog training: *Don’t Shoot the Dog (DTSD)*. *DTSD* wasn’t really written for the dog training community, but that’s exactly how we found her. In *DTSD*, **Karen provides eight straightforward ways to solve any behavior problem:**

1. Shoot the animal – get rid of the husband, the dog, whoever’s causing trouble.
2. Punishment (everyone’s favorite, even though it rarely works).
3. Negative reinforcement – remove something unpleasant when the learner does what you want.
4. Extinction – letting the behavior fade away by not reinforcing it.
5. Teach an incompatible behavior – if your dog jumps, teach him to sit. He can’t sit and jump at the same time.
6. Put the behavior on cue (then never give the cue!).
7. Shape the absence of a behavior – reinforce *anything* that isn’t the undesired behavior.
8. Change the motivation (make the learner *want to comply*).

This newsletter will focus on Method 2: Punish the Behavior because, well, that’s what most clients are doing when they come to me. **If**

punishment really worked they wouldn’t call me, clients could solve their own problem.

So why is that the first “tool” for which we reach?

The answer is more complex than I have space for here, but let me offer a simplified answer: **We punish because it feels good.** Yep, that’s right – we like it (humans in general, that is). We equate punishment with justice. And who doesn’t like justice?! Unfortunately, punishment *isn’t* justice. **It may temporarily make us feel better, but it damages our relationships in the long run.**

And worse, punishment, to be effective, must happen at exactly the same time the behavior is happening, be at exactly the right intensity to stop behavior, and must not be associated with you, the punishment-giver. There are other conditions, but these are some of the most important.

When clients come to see me, I hear about how they “tried all kinds of punishment, but nothing works!” And, oh, by the way, the dog also seems to be a tiny bit afraid of them – can I fix that, too? **These clients, well meaning but misinformed by the Whisperers, have made their situation worse, not better.**

So why do we punish even if it clearly doesn’t work? Especially if it damages our relationships? As I mentioned before, I believe it’s because we feel it’s our way to exact justice. The dog peed on the carpet (made our life miserable), so we must do something to make his life miserable (we yell, we scold, we rub his nose in it). We do these



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things *even though they don't have much effect* on the dog's behavior in the future. Because it's what needs to be done, it's justice.

Another reason I think we punish – because it makes us feel better. Usually, we're frustrated when we dole out punishment. **When's the last time you yelled at your dog when you were happy?** Never. It looks like this: you're in your suit when the dog comes in from outside and whacks his muddy paw on your *dry-clean-only* suit. Your first reaction is to yell and shove the dog off. It makes you feel better to vent your frustration. Punishment makes us feel better. It doesn't have any effect on whether or not the dog will put his paw on you in the future, but man does it feel *good!*

As a culture, we've also got a warped view of discipline. I'm not sure when discipline stopped meaning drive and focus and concentration (the Olympians are well disciplined athletes) and started meaning, well, punishment.

I'm frequently asked: "What's the best way to discipline my dog?" I won't teach you how to discipline your dog. **Your dog doesn't need discipline. He needs a teacher.** Someone who will stand up for him, teach him the rules, and then help him succeed. Now THAT I will teach!

In Pryor's DSTD, her preferred method of changing behavior is #8 – Change the Motivation. A well-fed child won't have a temper tantrum while standing in line in the grocery store. A tired dog (from playing) isn't likely to jump on people as much.

The most unfair action we can do to our dogs is to assume their motivation. "He jumps because he's dominant." "He doesn't drop the ball because he's hogging it." "He doesn't come when I call because he's stubborn." No, probably because either he hasn't been taught or he hasn't been reinforced for doing so in the past.

Don't fall into the punishment trap. It will damage the relationship you have with your dog and won't help get rid of the annoying behavior either. It's really a lose-lose situation.

Find a trainer who uses dog-friendly positive reinforcement training. You won't hear words like dominance, discipline, or punishment. You and your dog will learn how to be cooperative partners, not difficult house mates. **You'll be amazed at how quickly your dog's behavior changes** (and your attitude toward your dog!).

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