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Your Smart Dog Cheat Sheet #2 – Powerful Punishment November 2006

This is a continuation of last month's newsletter on the science of dog training. With this series, I'm hoping to arm you with what you need to know about the science so you'll have the tools necessary to teach your dog anything you want – in a humane and effective manner that both you and your dog will enjoy. Last month's newsletter introduced the science and focused on operant conditioning, specifically positive reinforcement. Reinforcement is only half of operant conditioning, though, so this month's cheat sheet will focus on the other half – punishment.

Punishment has some rather unsavory side effects, which is one of the (many) reasons that punishment isn't the best tool to teach your dog.

Punishment, if used properly, has the opposite effect of reinforcement. Punishment decreases behavior, where reinforcement (rewards) increases behavior. Just like reinforcement, punishment must occur *during the behavior* in order to have any effect on that behavior. Too often, however, owners attempt to punish a dog after an incident has already occurred. A common example is house soiling – the dog pees or poops in the house while you're gone, and when you come home and find the mess, you pull the

dog over to it, show it to him, and scold "Bad dog! Bad dog!" Because the scolding didn't happen *when the dog was going to the bathroom*, the scolding is ineffective. Dogs can't think backwards in time and realize that the act of going to the bathroom was the bad thing. All they know is that when you come home and show them their mess, bad things happen. Hence the "guilty looks" the dog gives you. He's not feeling guilty, he just knows that you're mad and he's doing his best to give you as many signals as possible that he'd like to avoid what's coming.

Punishment has some rather unsavory side effects, which is one of the (many) reasons that punishment isn't the best tool to teach your dog. Some good reasons NOT to use punishment are listed below.

Punishment:

- Increases anxiety and fear.
- Ruins the relationship you have built with your dog. You become a threat, not a cooperative partner.
- Slows down learning. Yes, punishment actually inhibits learning.

...punishment must happen at the same time as the behavior or the punishment won't be associated with the inappropriate behavior.



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- Doesn't give the information your dog needs to know what TO DO. There are lots of things you don't want your dog to do. And the list of things that are acceptable is pretty short in comparison.
- Makes your dog more reactive, which increases aggression.
- Increases the risk of physical injury to your dog. Dogs manhandled with choke chains, prong collars, and physical force suffer injuries to the larynx, esophagus, and trachea.

Unfortunately for the dog, humans are rewarded when they punish the dog.

In addition to the pitfalls above, timing is critical if you choose to use punishment. As I mentioned earlier, punishment must happen *at the same time as the behavior* or the punishment won't be associated with the inappropriate behavior. When using reinforcement, if your timing is a little off when rewarding your dog, at least your overall relationship with your dog doesn't suffer. You still maintain your hero status in your dog's eyes. You're still building a good relationship, your dog is still enjoying spending time with you, and you both work together happily. Punishment, on the other hand, does nothing to facilitate that bond between you and your dog. And if your timing is off, you aren't even teaching him what you want (or don't want). But you're certainly chipping away at your relationship.

Unfortunately for the dog, humans are rewarded when they punish the dog. There

are a few interesting reasons for this. Awareness of these reasons will help you understand the science even better and help you understand how punishment and reinforcement work – for both you and your dog.

Let's say you've had a long day at work and want to get home so you can put your feet up and relax. But...you get home to find all the garbage out of the can. The dog comes running gleefully to greet you, plastic wrap hanging from his mouth, and you're not happy about it. Yelling at the dog makes you feel better. You're venting your frustrations of the day toward your dog and man, you sure do feel better after getting that off your chest! Voila, you will yell at the dog again next week when he gets in the trash because it felt good to vent, not because it had any effect on the dog's behavior (which it didn't if he's in the trash again next week).

Another reason it makes us feel good to punish is because we think it's *what should be done*. It's justice, after all. And justice is good, right? So we feel better after we punish our dog for getting in the trash. (When what we should have done is put the trash in a dog-proof environment, but that's for next month's newsletter...)

Another way that punishment is rewarding to us is because it looks like it works. The dog **does** look guilty the next time you catch him with something in his mouth. He **does** hang his head or avert his eyes when you catch him doing something he shouldn't be doing. The mistake here is that we're assigning our emotions to the dog. The dog only knows that nothing good ever happens



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when you come home and look sternly at him and ask him “Did you do this?!” In fact, only bad stuff happens after that question, so they try to appease you before it even begins. Those things you’re seeing – the tucked tail, the hanging head, the avoidance – that’s not guilt you see. That’s a normal dog trying to defuse a tense situation. Not remorse, but simple dog language. We, the humans, simply interpret it to be what we think it should be.

Some of you are rolling your eyes, knowing for certain that your dog knows right from wrong and acts guilty when he’s been caught being naughty. I hear you, I used to believe the very same thing. However, my mind changed one day when I tried this simple experiment. Instead of pointing at the pile of poop, I went into a different room, pointed at the electrical outlet in the wall and said “Did you do this?!” The dog took one look at the electrical outlet (which has been there since we’ve moved in!) and gave me the same look and behavior he does when I pointed at the pile of poop. From that moment on, it was crystal clear to me that *I* was the one the dog associated with the bad things, not the pile of poop or the upended trash can. It was my presence that caused the dog to act “guilty.” So powerful was that lesson that I’ve given up on punishment and now use reinforcement to teach my dogs what they need to know. If a service dog, who is relied upon to do complicated and potentially life-saving behaviors, can be taught without using punishment, so too can your dog. It may be a shift in thinking for some of you, but believe me, once you make that shift you’ll never look back.

In next month’s newsletter I’ll talk about specific training techniques that utilize reinforcement and show you how to solve everyday problems without using punishment.

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