

Del Ray Animal Hospital
524 E. Mount Ida Ave.
Alexandria, VA 22301
(703) 739-0000
www.delrayanimalhospital.com

CANINE PUNISHMENT

Punishment is the application of a stimulus that decreases the chances that a behavior will be repeated. It must be timed to coincide with the undesirable behavior, and must be unpleasant enough to deter the dog from repeating the behavior. Keep in mind that you are punishing the behavior not the dog. Punishment should never be considered unless the pet has the means to satisfy its nature and its needs. For example, the chewing dog should be provided with appropriate exercise and appealing toys to chew on, before any attempts to punish undesirable chewing are initiated. If however, we can train our pets to do what they are supposed to and provide outlets for their needs, then it will seldom be necessary to punish inappropriate behavior.

How can punishment be used to correct behavior problems?

The key to successful punishment is to associate an unpleasant consequence with the undesirable behavior. Remember that punishment must take place while the behavior is occurring, not after. Physical or direct interactive punishment is likely to lead to fear of the owner and fear of the hand. Therefore the use of punishment products may be more appropriate and more effective, since they are less likely to be associated with the owner, and are more specific and immediate than owner intervention whether verbal or physical. Most of these devices actually serve to interrupt or disrupt the inappropriate behavior, so that the dog can be directed to perform an appropriate behavior. For example the dog that is barking could be interrupted with an air horn or shake can and immediately taught to approach the owners to play with a favored toy.

Punishment should never be used to train a pet. The pet can be taught what we want using lure reward methods, rewards and shaping or prompting and rewards. It is illogical to wait until the pet misbehaves and then administer something unpleasant. Punishing the pet can lead to fear of the owner, fear of handling or fear of particular stimuli (approach, reaching out, pulling leash). If punishment is effective it can at best stop the behavior from recurring in that location. The dog will however continue to perform the undesirable behavior (chewing, elimination) in virtually any other location. Ultimately with continued punishment the pet will inhibit the behavior in the owner's presence (and continue the behavior in the owner's absence). Where punishment is not sufficiently unpleasant it may serve as a reward (attention). Finally, in some cases where the pet is punished then immediately rewarded (as in some training techniques), the punishment can actually become a reward, once it has been consistently paired with rewards. Therefore the only indication for punishment by the owner is for those behaviors that only occur in the owners presence. In addition, if the pet repeats the behavior after one or two applications then it is ineffective and should be discontinued.

Punishing the dog while the owner remains out of sight is a better way of teaching the pet to avoid the behavior altogether, whether the owner is present or not. This is known as 'remote punishment' (punishment administered by the owner while remaining out of sight) and takes a great deal of preparation, time and forethought. Perhaps the only practical application of punishment is to booby trap the area (sometimes known as 'environmental punishment'), so that the dog is punished even in the owner's absence.

If you catch your puppy engaging in an incorrect behavior, try a loud noise such as clapping your hands, or a loud "uh-uh". Remember, reprimands need to occur while the behavior is happening, preferably just as it begins, and never after. Often puppies will be startled when they hear these noises and temporarily stop the behavior. At that time you need to quickly redirect the puppy to a more appropriate task.

Another way to interrupt your puppy is with various types of noise devices. One such device is a "shaker can". This is an empty soda can that has a few pennies inside and then is taped shut. When given a vigorous shake it makes a loud noise which will often interrupt the puppy's behavior. Another device that makes a loud noise are "rape alarms". These can be obtained at department and drug stores and when activated make a shrill, loud piercing noise, which will startle the puppy. Commercial dog training devices, some which use ultrasonics, are also available.

How does remote punishment work?

For remote techniques to be successful there are two key elements. The first is that the owner must monitor the dog while out of sight so that the owner knows when the problem begins. The second element is that the punishment must be delivered while the inappropriate behavior is occurring (while the owner remains out of sight).

Keep a close watch on the problem area while hidden out of sight (around a corner, in a nearby closet, or behind a piece of furniture). Alternately, the dog can be monitored using a video monitor, intercom, or a motion detector (such as the Tattle Tale monitor), which makes a loud beep whenever it is disturbed.

As soon as the dog enters the area or begins to perform the undesirable behavior, use a long range water rifle, noise device or remote control device to chase the dog away. A punishment device (water pik, hair dryer or alarm) can be plugged into a remote control plug in the problem area. Then, as the dog enters the area or begins the inappropriate behavior, the device can be activated by remote control. If the dog cannot determine where the noise or water is coming from, it should quickly learn to stay away from the area whether the owner is present or not. The dog could also be monitored and "corrected" from a distance by leaving a long, remote leash attached, and pulling as soon as inappropriate behavior begins.

How can I booby trap the environment to punish the pet?

Punishing the behavior remotely, with the owner out of sight, is impractical if the dog cannot be prevented from performing the undesirable behavior when the owner is not available to supervise and monitor. Booby traps are a way of teaching the pet to avoid the area, or the behavior itself. The most practical devices are those that are unpleasant enough to deter the behavior, and reset themselves, or remain active should the pet return to the area. One of the simplest ways to discourage a dog from entering an area where an undesirable behavior is likely to be performed (garbage raiding, chewing, entering rooms) would be to make the area less appealing by placing balloons set to pop, a pyramid of empty cans set to topple, or a bucket of water set to dump as the pet enters the area. Mousetrap trainers, motion detectors, alarm mats, shock mats, and indoor electronic "fencing", are also effective at keeping dogs away from problem areas.

Taste deterrents might also be helpful for destructive chewing, provided they are unpleasant enough to deter the behavior. Products such as bitter apple, bitter lime or Tabasco sauce are often recommended, but many dogs do not mind, or learn to enjoy the taste. A little water mixed with cayenne pepper, oil of eucalyptus, any non-toxic mentholated product, or one of the commercial anti-chew sprays often work best. To be effective, the first exposure to a product must be as repulsive as is humanely possible, so that the dog is immediately repelled whenever it smells or tastes that product again. Never leave any objects or areas untreated until the dog learns to leave the object or area alone.

What should I do if I find the problem after it has already occurred?

If you find something that your puppy has done (destruction, elimination), but you did not catch him in the act, just clean it up and vow to supervise your puppy better in the future. Do not get your puppy and bring him over to the mess and yell and physically discipline him. Remember that you need to punish the behavior you wish to change. If you did not see your puppy chew up the object, all you are doing is disciplining your puppy for being present at a mess on the floor. Since that makes no sense to your puppy, your reprimands could create fear and anxiety, which could lead to aggression and owner avoidance.

If I must not punish my dog after the problem has occurred, what can be done?

Other than designing appropriate environmental booby traps, the only thing that you can do to avoid undesirable behavior is to supervise your puppy when you are around, and to prevent access to potential problems when you are not available to supervise. Another option, when you are at home, is to keep a remote leash attached (preferably to a head halter) to prevent wandering off, and getting into mischief. If a problem begins to emerge while the puppy is on a leash, a quick pull on the leash will immediately interrupt the behavior, and if a head halter is being used, will immediately turn the head and mouth away from the problem area. Remember that problems such as chewing and other forms of destructiveness are part of the puppies normal curiosity and desire to chew. Always provide suitable play objects designed to entertain your puppy so that he will not want to destroy your possessions.