



MIND YOUR MANNERS: WHY DOG TRAINING METHODS MATTER

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Veterinarians in general practice are familiar with seeing dogs who have had very little training and clients who are struggling with how to train their pet. The importance of good training for dog welfare cannot be overstated. Training, achieved most often with the help of a professional trainer, can assist dog guardians with puppy socialization, body handling, medication administration, and teaching learned cues that help keep dogs safe and make them easy to care for (e.g., walking on a leash, house training, and recall).

In contrast, lack of training can result in poor “manners,” fearfulness, and other behavioural issues, all of which have the potential to severely limit the enjoyment and relationship that guardians seek to have with their dogs. It can also impede their health care. Like many veterinarians in general practice, Dr. Hatley McMicking sees first-hand how poor training affects veterinary exams. She says that for example, “Negative experiences at home can cause animals to not let me touch their face or mouth at all,” posing a challenge for dental exams.

In addition, when dominance, punishment-based, or other unscientific aversive training methods are used, unwanted behaviours can be made worse. Dr. Claudia Richter, a resident at the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists, frequently sees the unwanted outcomes of aversive handling in her veterinary behaviour practice. A common example is when guardians push their dogs down and onto their backs (the so-called “alpha roll”). She explains that this technique “often leads to dogs biting when people try to pet them, especially in dogs that roll on their back when they meet people.”

PROBLEMS WITH AVERSIVE TRAINING METHODS

According to the American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior, aversive training methods are those that rely on the application of force, pain, or emotional or physical discomfort. This can include use of training tools such as shock, prong, or choke collars or actions such “alpha rolling,” spraying water, or throwing noise-making items to startle the dog (i.e., coin cans). For some particularly fearful dogs, activities that are not intended (or designed) to cause pain or be intimidating may still have that effect on the dog (for example, raised voices, threatening gestures).

Empirical studies on dog training have documented the negative effects on animal welfare that occur when aversive training (also referred to as “punishment-based training”) methods are used. For example, during training sessions using aversive methods, dogs demonstrated more stress-related behaviours and body language such as lip licking, paw lifting, and lowered tail and body posture. In addition, more frequent use of aversive training methods, alone or in combination with reward-based methods, is associated with increased reporting of problem behaviours by dog owners including aggressive behaviours. Aversive training methods also present an increased risk of physical injury to the dog.

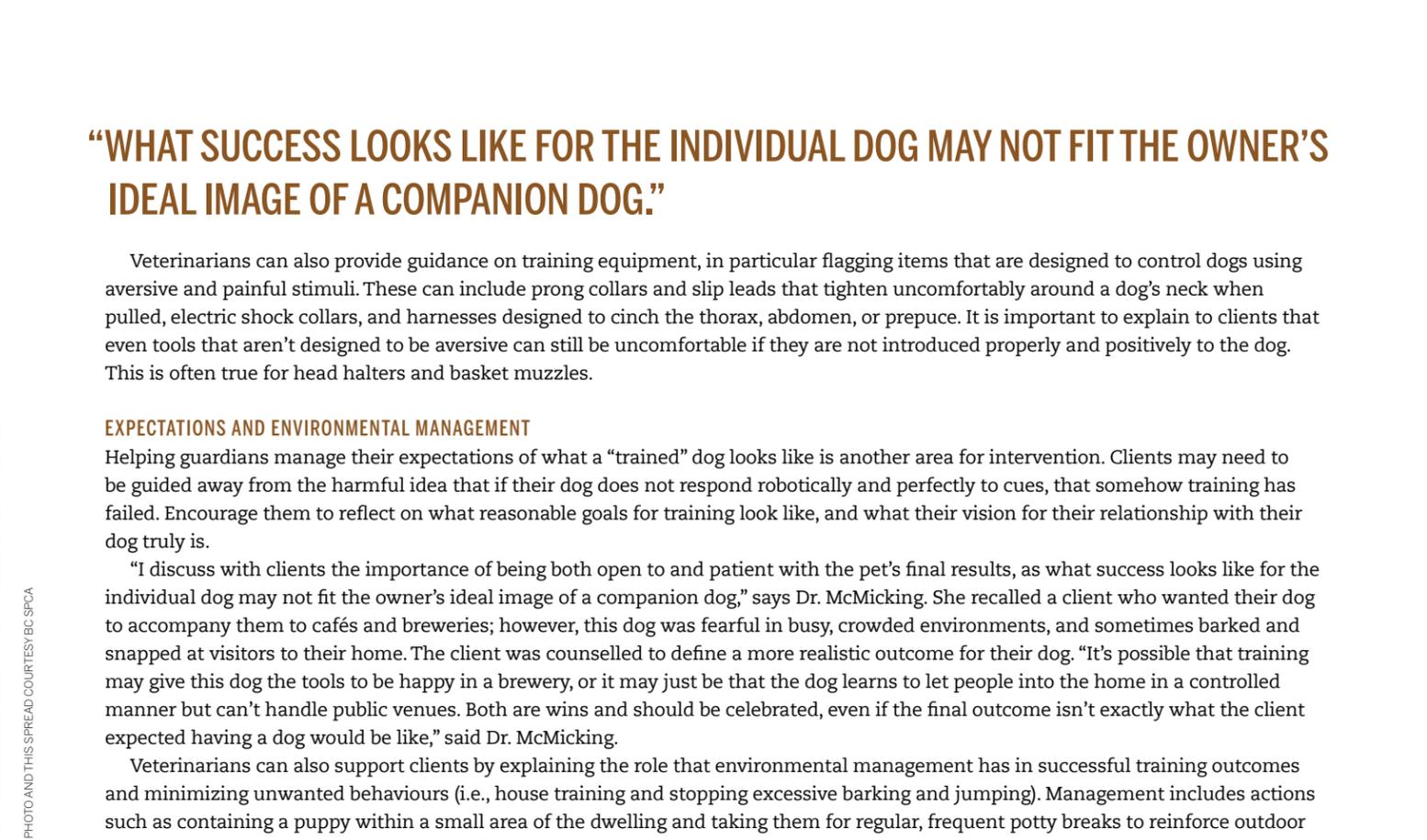
BENEFITS OF REWARD-BASED TRAINING APPROACHES

Reward-based training methods, also known as “humane training,” loosely refer to training techniques and tools that an animal does not perceive as physically or emotionally uncomfortable. To reinforce a desired behaviour, something the animal wants is added (e.g., a food treat), which increases the likelihood the behaviour will reoccur. For example, a treat or other reward is given to a dog when they fetch their ball, which builds their desire to want to continue to fetch. This approach can be used to help a dog learn which behaviours they will be rewarded for performing, with the associated cues, thereby teaching the dog what to do.

Reward-based methods can also be used to help overcome fears and unwanted behaviours. Systematic desensitization refers to a behavioural treatment for phobias that involves slowly presenting the animal with increasingly strong fear-provoking stimuli while keeping the animal under threshold (in a relaxed state). Counter-conditioning refers to the procedure of repeatedly pairing an initially fear-inducing stimulus (conditioned stimulus) and a positive stimulus (an unconditioned stimulus such as food, attention, or play). After related pairings, the animal becomes conditioned to experience a positive emotional response to the previously fear-inducing stimulus.

Reward-based training has been shown to be more effective than aversive training. Studies that have assessed learning outcomes (learning ability and obedience scores) found that use of reward-based training was associated with better training success than aversive methods. In addition, because reward-based training does not rely on the creation of fearful or painful emotional states to achieve training goals, it can improve and strengthen the dog-human relationship.

The evidence-based consensus is that aversive methods harm dog welfare and that reward-based methods are effective at helping dogs learn and strengthening the human-animal bond. This is reflected in position statements from veterinary organizations such as the American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior and the CVMA, which endorse the use of reward-based training methods only.



OPENING PHOTO AND THIS SPREAD COURTESY BC SPCA

ROLE OF THE VETERINARIAN

Passed down through the influence of family and dog culture, and in some cases popularized by the media, unscientific or aversive training methods are often the only training techniques pet guardians are aware of. Words like “command” and “obedience” are from the strong influence of military training methods from the 1950s and 60s, and tools like choke, shock, and prong collars (used exclusively for punishment-based training) are readily found on the shelves and online at most major pet supply retailers. These influences, combined with the lack of regulation for the dog training and pet services sector in Canada, make choosing a training method or a trainer confusing for dog guardians.

Fortunately, veterinarians are well-placed to counter misinformation and provide early intervention and science-backed advice on training, trainers, and dog behaviour. In a 2021 poll of dog-owning British Columbians, 84 per cent of respondents indicated one of the most important factors in having trust in a dog trainer was a

recommendation from their veterinarian.¹ For Dr. McMicking, the opportunity to influence her clients’ dog training choices occurs frequently. She explains, “I make recommendations for training nearly daily, and the needs can range from basic lack of training to fearful or aggressive behaviours.”

DEMISTIFYING DOG BODY LANGUAGE AND TRAINING TOOLS

It is very important that guardians understand that dogs communicate through their bodies. Guardians need to be able to identify positive body language, which includes loose, wiggly bodies, relaxed ears and mouth, and soft eyes. Clients should also be counselled to recognize signs of anxiety and fear, such as panting, yawning, lowered or crouching bodies, and lifting up a single front paw. Fearful dogs may also have their ears pinned back, the whites of their eyes showing (whale eye), and/or be licking their lips. Dr. McMicking finds it easy to bring up body language because many of her clients want to talk about their dog’s behaviour. She says, “When possible, I try to point out specific body positions during the exam so the client can have a visual for what we’re discussing.”

Explaining specific behavioural observations to a pet guardian can have a big impact. Dr. Richter recalled a client describing their dog as friendly and enjoying being petting by anyone, which differed from the dog’s actual behaviour in the clinic. “I pointed out that while he was friendly toward myself and my staff, he never once solicited petting, but sniffed me multiple times, took treats from me and played with a toy. Once I pointed it out, they realized that he was friendly, but might not necessarily enjoy petting from an unfamiliar person.”

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Veterinarians can also provide guidance on training equipment, in particular flagging items that are designed to control dogs using aversive and painful stimuli. These can include prong collars and slip leads that tighten uncomfortably around a dog’s neck when pulled, electric shock collars, and harnesses designed to cinch the thorax, abdomen, or prepuce. It is important to explain to clients that even tools that aren’t designed to be aversive can still be uncomfortable if they are not introduced properly and positively to the dog. This is often true for head halters and basket muzzles.

EXPECTATIONS AND ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT

Helping guardians manage their expectations of what a “trained” dog looks like is another area for intervention. Clients may need to be guided away from the harmful idea that if their dog does not respond robotically and perfectly to cues, that somehow training has failed. Encourage them to reflect on what reasonable goals for training look like, and what their vision for their relationship with their dog truly is.

“I discuss with clients the importance of being both open to and patient with the pet’s final results, as what success looks like for the individual dog may not fit the owner’s ideal image of a companion dog,” says Dr. McMicking. She recalled a client who wanted their dog to accompany them to cafés and breweries; however, this dog was fearful in busy, crowded environments, and sometimes barked and snapped at visitors to their home. The client was counselled to define a more realistic outcome for their dog. “It’s possible that training may give this dog the tools to be happy in a brewery, or it may just be that the dog learns to let people into the home in a controlled manner but can’t handle public venues. Both are wins and should be celebrated, even if the final outcome isn’t exactly what the client expected having a dog would be like,” said Dr. McMicking.

Veterinarians can also support clients by explaining the role that environmental management has in successful training outcomes and minimizing unwanted behaviours (i.e., house training and stopping excessive barking and jumping). Management includes actions such as containing a puppy within a small area of the dwelling and taking them for regular, frequent potty breaks to reinforce outdoor elimination. For clients with a reactive or fearful dog, environmental management can include covering up house windows at the dog’s eye level and planning dog-walking routes to avoid triggers and reduce the times that the dog goes over their tolerance threshold.



HELPING CLIENTS GET TRAINING SUPPORT

Clients can be educated about the available options if they need support with training. In some cases, veterinarians may also be consulted on whether or not anxiety-reducing psychopharmaceuticals are a good option. Dr. Richter advises that clinics put reward-based training resources in their puppy packs, and that veterinarians do their research before recommending a dog trainer. It can be challenging for clients to interpret marketing jargon to identify the truly reward-based trainers in this unregulated industry. Some punishment-based trainers use softer-sounding terms to describe their methods, such as “balanced” dog training, which actually describes training methods that use both rewards and aversive methods such as physical punishment. These trainers may also say that they need to be able to use “every tool in the toolbox” and “corrective tools,” and that there is more than one way to train dogs. These trainers should be avoided (see the resources at the end of this article for additional considerations for choosing a trainer).

Dr. Richter has seen many cases where the switch to using reward-based training resulted in dramatic behavioural improvements. “One story recently that sticks out was a dog who was guarding his bed. A ‘trainer’ had recommended they use dominance to correct the behaviour—getting into the space the dog was guarding, staring at the dog, standing over him in a threatening manner, etc. All of those made things worse and ended up with the dog guarding any space he was in.” The family switched to working with a reward-based trainer and started to see changes in their dog because, says Dr. Richter, the dog was now learning that “people in his space meant good things, i.e., treats, and nobody was threatening him anymore. While he still needed more help, the



REFERRING TO A DOG TRAINER

Choosing a trainer can be a challenge for dog guardians, in part because the dog training and pet care services sector is unregulated in Canada. Recommend to clients that they look for trainers who:

- Train with rewards like treats, food, and play
 - Make training fun for the dog
 - Require dog guardians to watch or participate
 - Explain dog behaviour and body language
 - Behave professionally and treat you and your dog with respect
 - Work collaboratively with veterinarians
- Avoid referrals to dog trainers who:
- Use punishment like shouting, pushing, hitting, or leash corrections
 - Use shock, prong, or choke collars
 - Refuse to let clients watch or participate
 - Refuse to use treats or food rewards
 - Talk about “dominance” or “alphas”
 - Give medical advice or diagnoses

TRAINER ACCREDITATION

The following accreditation programs can help you and your clients find science-based dog trainers.

- BC SPCA AnimalKind: animalkind.ca
- Certified applied animal behaviorist (CAAB): animalbehaviorsociety.org/web/applied-behavior-caab-application.php
- Karen Pryor Academy (KPA): karenpryoracademy.com
- International Association of Animal Behaviour Consultants (IAABC): iaabc.org
- Certification Council for Professional Dog Trainers (CCPDT): www.ccpdt.org
- Academy for Dog Trainers: academyfordogtrainers.com

training had already helped make their relationship much better, and the condition had significantly improved.”

Veterinarians play a key role in pet guardians’ decisions about which training or behaviour modification methods to use, and Dr. Richter and Dr. McMicking emphasize that interventions with science-based training advice helps to keep animals in their homes and improves their welfare. Although both aversive and reward-based methods can be effective in changing dog’s behaviour, the evidence-based practitioner must also consider the welfare and long-term behavioural consequences of the training methods. On this point, the evidence is clear: aversive methods harm dog welfare, while reward-based training both helps dogs learn and preserves the bond between people and their pets. **WCV**

¹Stratcom poll conducted for the BC SPCA May 12–17, 2021 (n = 1,500, margin of error +/-2.5 per cent, 19 times out of 20)

To save space, the references for this article are made available on the Chapter’s website at www.canadianveterinarians.net/sbcv/west-coast-veterinarian-magazine.

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