



# About Aversives In Training

by Terry Ryan

"Catch them in the act of doing something good". At Kokua dog training we stress and reinforce good behavior in your dog. We'd rather spend time coaching you how to do that than explaining why aversives or punishment\* might not achieve your long-term goals. We *do* have reasons for relying on reward-based methods of training. Here are a few of them. In this handout, the term "aversive" refers to the delivery of something unpleasant in an attempt to stop unwanted behavior. Commonly known as corrections, these aversives include jerking the leash, scolding or a smack with a newspaper. There are humane and Effective Alternatives. (E A's).



*\*The definition of punishment in the handout is adding something aversive in an attempt to stop a behavior.*

**Introduction:** *Ten-year-old Sally was reading a book. Her mom walked in and screamed at her, grabbed her by her collar and shook her. Sally was astonished. Thoughts going through Sally's mind: "Ouch, I'm afraid!" "Why is Mom punishing me?" "Mom usually encourages me to read!" "Am I bad for sitting in Dad's chair?" "Is this library book late?" "Is Mom having a bad day?" Sally's mom was punishing her because she hadn't washed the dishes as requested earlier. Think about Sally's confusion. Think about how you will train your dog.*

## AN INCOMPLETE PROGRAM

Aversives only address what NOT to do. You might be lucky. Your dog might stop the punished behavior due to distraction, but then what? It's not nice to mug visitors, but is your dog clear on what behavior is expected? (See "taxi" end of article). At Kokua you'll learn Effective Alternatives (E A's).

## AVERSIVES CAN ESCALATE FEARFUL BEHAVIORS

While walking, your dog sees a man in a hat. She's worried. She barks at him and pulls back. You holler and jerk her leash. Now she has to worry about him AND you. In addition, she might perceive that you are also reacting to the man, confirming to her that the guy really is scary. (There are E A's!)

## INEFFECTIVE ATTEMPTS AT CORRECTIONS CAN BE A REWARD

Your dog is in the backyard barking. You open the door and holler, "Bad!" What you consider a punishment, your dog may find rewarding. You're looking at him and talking to him--if he's barking to seek attention, he's been rewarded, regardless of what you are saying to him. (E A's? Sure!)



## **AVERSIVES MIGHT DAMAGE YOUR RELATIONSHIP**

Kokua's programs are based upon relationships. Punishment can cause confusion and reduces the trust that is so important between you and your dog. It's best to earn your dog's respect by consistent guidance and positive training, not to demand it through intimidation or force. (Let's use E A's!)

## **TO BE EFFECTIVE, PUNISHMENT NEEDS TO BE IMMEDIATE**

For any chance of the appropriate association to be learned, punishment should occur within about two seconds of the behavior. How's your timing? Can you pull that off? (Consider E A's)

## **USING AN AVERSIVE MIGHT OR MIGHT NOT GENERALIZE**

You said "Heel" but your dog strains ahead. You jerk the leash. What's the point? No pulling? No pulling on this block? No pulling on sidewalks, but okay to pull on paths? We don't really know if dogs learn what we are trying to teach! (Effective and positive Alternative training methods can allow you both to enjoy the walk.)

## **PUNISHMENT ONLY SUPPRESSES BEHAVIOR**

Owners hope that punishment will stop a behavior. There is evidence to suggest that adding an aversive after an unwanted behavior may only "stun" a behavior temporarily, if it works at all. (Employ Effective Alternatives).

## **WILL YOUR DOG MAKE THE RIGHT ASSOCIATION?**

If you scream at your dog for chasing a cat, will he think he shouldn't have chased the cat? Or think you are angry because he didn't go faster and actually CATCH the cat? A child was nearby when you hollered at your dog. Will the dog link your punishment and his anxiety to children? (Reduce grey areas of learning with E A's.)

## **AVERSIVES CAN LEAD TO THE LEARNED HELPLESSNESS SYNDROME**

The dog decides that no matter what she does, it's wrong, therefore it's safer to do nothing at all. She gives up, she shuts down, she just endures the punishment. (Teach your dog an acceptable behavior as an E A.)

## **THE GENERATION OF A SUBSTITUTE BEHAVIOR**

Repetitive actions, such as barking, digging and chewing can calm a dog, much like rocking a baby, has a calming effect. It feels good. If your dog is getting a "barker's high" and you stop the barking, she might turn to a substitute behavior for her gratification. The new behavior might be more annoying or dangerous. (E A's)



## THE CYCLE OF VIOLENCE

Children are watching and you are a role model. Research suggests that a childhood fraught with violence, abuse or disregard of animals produces people who may pass the same behaviors on to next generations.

## THE PUNISHMENT CALLUS

Learning science suggests that a punishment should be aversive and intense enough to stop the behavior right away. If it is not effective, the tendency is for people to escalate the strength of successive punishments. The resulting "callus" you have built now requires you to administer a harsher punishment than would have been necessary before you desensitized your dog. (An Effective Alternative might be kinder and easier for both you and your dog.)

## IT MUST BE DO-ABLE BY THE OWNER

Few owners have the skill or desire to deliver a successful punishment. (Reward-based E A's are more forgiving.) If your timing is off with positive reinforcement, the result is only an extra pat or treat for your dog.

## YOUR DOG MIGHT THINK THE AVERSIVE IS CONTINGENT ON YOUR PRESENCE

Your dog should perceive the aversive as a direct result of his behavior. The consequence should seem to come from the environment. If instead the consequence is linked to you, your dog might risk engaging in bad behavior when he knows you're not around to see. (E A's build motivation for your dog to do the "right" thing.)

## WHERE IS THE LINE?

Where's the line between the use of aversive techniques in the name of training... and abuse?

## DOES THE USE OF AN AVERSIVE MAKE YOU FEEL BETTER?

The goal of your training techniques should be to change your dog's behavior. It should not be a means to vent your own frustration. The two issues should be dealt with separately.

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**TAXI !!** *You get into a taxi in Seattle. You tell the driver: "I don't want to go to the airport," "Don't you dare take me to the Space Needle," "You know better than to drive me to the ferry terminal," "No! Bad! Not Pikes Place Market". Can the taxi driver possibly please you? This negative manner of communication conveys no message of what you actually want... And it's stressful for the driver.*

*(This FAQ is written from the experience of Terry Ryan with information from the practical & scholarly works of R Bailey, NH Azrin, M & K Breland, M Burch, R Lockwood, K Pryor, B Schwartz, K Sdao, M Sidman, M Seligman, BF Skinner & others.)*