

SHOCK COLLARS – THE UGLY TRUTH

by Valerie Barry, Professional Dog Trainer, North Vancouver

From the perspective of a competent and knowledgeable dog trainer, training with shock collars is one of the worst methods ever introduced as “training” that continues to persist with alarming intensity.

Shock collars are marketed to unsuspecting pet dog owners as a “quick fix” for serious behavioural issues as well as a fast way to “train” your dog. The perception seems to be that if you’ve tried everything else and nothing worked, this will fix your problem. Or if you have a big or “difficult” breed, you need some serious equipment to “control” or “dominate” them. Nothing could be further from the truth, and this whole way of thinking is inaccurate and dangerous. We have come leaps and bounds along the road in understanding dogs – how they think and how they learn – in the past 15 or so years. Science has clearly proven that punishment based methods of training like shock collars (prong collars, choke collars, drowning, choking, dominating, correcting, etc.) do not work as “training” and have some very serious side effects.

If science doesn’t interest you, how about results? Again, it’s been researched, tested, proven and documented that positive reinforcement training is faster, more efficient, and has longer term retention – something punishment methods cannot accurately claim. Better yet, positive reinforcement promotes good mental health for your dog – it allows them to think, puzzle out solutions, safely offer various behaviours as options, gain confidence and create desirable end behaviours that are happily performed and last a lifetime. Confidence is an important skill for dogs - isn’t that true for all of us? A confident dog knows what is expected of him in all the circumstances that are important to you and he will perform his skills reliably. Problem behaviours can be extinguished (or prevented from ever occurring) and new behaviours can take their place.

Punishment, by definition, suppresses behaviour. Shock collars are punishment. Therefore, shock collars do not eliminate behaviour – they suppress it – very big difference. Behaviours that are suppressed are still there and they are still getting reinforced because the things that cause them are still there too. If the punishment that is causing the behaviours to be suppressed is removed (you’re not holding the remote), temporarily unavailable (batteries are dead) or inexpertly applied (some small child gets hold of the remote and starts zapping away) - what do you think might happen? The scary part is that you never really know – think about that statement: “you never really know what’s going to happen” - whew. You might get lucky and nothing happens or you might not be so lucky. Of course, society also finds it horrifically easy to “get rid” of “bad” dogs when things go horribly wrong and simply start again with another one - how sad, how inexcusable and how irresponsible. How easily preventable.

99.9% of behavioural problems, mild or serious, have their basis in fear and anxiety. You simply cannot punish fear-based behaviours in order to eliminate them. More often than not, you still end up having the same behaviours and you’ve now made them much worse or you’ve caused the fear to spread to other things or events. Fear generalizes very quickly. When you use a shock

collar, you are applying a piece of equipment that itself causes fear and anxiety to a behaviour that is rooted in fear and anxiety – that just makes no logical sense -it has no chance of working well. You absolutely must work, instead, to alleviate that fear and create alternatives for the dog – it's the only way that's effective – it's the only way that's humane.

Here's a human example of punishment and fear: If you're afraid of spiders and every time you see one you scream and I shock you until you stop, does that make you feel less afraid when you see the next one? Honestly imagine a similar scenario with a fear you have. The answer is obvious – the shock did not make your fear go away - not at all. You may learn to suppress your reaction to spiders when I'm around in order to avoid the shock, but the underlying emotion behind the reaction is still there. Not only that, but you now have to worry about me when spiders are around, which will increase your fear in general and maybe create a fear or discomfort of me. It's also extremely likely that your reaction to spiders will increase even when I'm not around and you're free to scream without consequence.

And none of this is fun. None of this is informative and helpful communication – it's bullying and it's forced submission. You're being forced to suppress your reaction to spiders but you haven't learned how to deal with your fear of spiders at all. You haven't learned an alternate behaviour or a coping skill to help you eliminate your fear of spiders. You've just learned that when I'm around it's bad to scream (show your fear) and if you do, you'll be punished. It's even worse when you apply that rationale to dogs because they don't speak our language. At least I can let you know, verbally, that I'm going to shock you if you show any reaction to spiders. You can clearly understand what I'm going to do and actively work to avoid it. Dogs just get shocked – no warning, no explanation – no fair.

“But the shock isn't supposed to really hurt”, you say; “I've tried it on my own arm and it's just a tingle or a small buzz”, you claim; “The shock just startles, it doesn't hurt at all”, your so-called trainer claims.

I have a big problem with these statements. You cannot possibly know how something feels to someone else – animal or human – period – no argument – it's impossible. Here's a human scenario: my husband gives me a high-five after a recent Vancouver Canuck's win. “Ow – that hurt”, I yelp! “That didn't hurt”, my husband says, “I barely touched you at all!”

Let's think about this. It really did sting when he slapped my open palm with his own. Why did it hurt? Maybe I have extremely sensitive or extremely thin skin; maybe I have an unusually low pain threshold; maybe my husband has an unusually high pain threshold; maybe the act of him sweeping his open palm toward me when I wasn't expecting it frightened me so badly that my body registered it as pain. Who knows and why does it matter? To me, it hurt and that's the only fact worth noting. He cannot tell me it didn't hurt – it's impossible for him to know that. He can feel that it shouldn't have hurt or think I'm being overly dramatic – but that's different. Because we share the same language, I can attempt to explain to him how it felt – but he still can't really know because he didn't feel what I felt. Dogs feel pain and emotions too – that's a fact.



As a trainer, I have met many dogs who have had shock collars on or live in yards with electric fencing systems (yes, that's a shock collar too and every bit as damaging). Every single one of these dogs displayed unnecessary and abnormal degrees of anxiety, fear and reactive behaviour – every single one. There is no question in my mind that dogs find this type of treatment scary, hurtful or confusing. You can't tell them that's it's just a "little tingle" or something that's just meant to "startle" them – there is zero helpful information being communicated. Just like humans and any other type of animal, there are dogs who are more or less sensitive than others. I have met dogs (and have one myself) who will flinch or cower at a simple "uh, uh" spoken in a mild tone. This may not seem very punishing to us, but it is to them – their body language doesn't lie, their behaviour doesn't lie. That shock collar is painful, frightening

and aversive to them whether we think it should be or not – it's as simple as that. As Karen Pryor states in her book, "Reaching The Animal Mind": "An aversive doesn't have to be punishing, but a punishment is always aversive". Ruining your hairstyle in a sudden rain shower is aversive but it's not punishing – it was an unintended event. But getting a sudden spray of water in the face from someone when you make a rude comment is a punishment and is definitely aversive.

This article isn't just my opinion – there are many facts stated here. But, you don't have to believe me, you can do your own research – there is tons of it out there. If you are considering using such a damaging piece of equipment like a shock collar, doesn't your dog deserve to have you put the time and effort into finding out the truth?

- Read biologist Raymond and Lorna Coppingers' book, "Dogs – A New Understanding of Canine Origin, Behaviour and Evolution".
- Read some of the articles written by David Mech, renowned wolf researcher and his explanation of the new terminology of "Parent Pair" replacing the old and inaccurate terminology "Alpha" or "Dominant".
- Read the beautifully written book on dogs and their emotions, "For The Love of a Dog" by Dr. Patricia McConnell.
- Read the remarkable book, "Reaching The Animal Mind" by renowned marine mammal trainer and animal behaviourist Karen Pryor.
- Talk to Steve White, a police officer working in the canine unit in his area who travels around the country lecturing and helping police departments train dogs for use in police work using a clicker – that's right, there are dogs working with the police who have been successfully trained to track, chase, bite, hold and release with positive reinforcement.

I do believe that there are many, many pet dog owners who truly believe they are doing the best for their dogs and believe they have received good advice when they strap on a shock collar. I hope with all my heart that pet owners search harder for the best advice, the most humane advice and think long and hard about what they want for their companion animals.

I also believe that there are people out there who are attracted to the apparent convenience of shock collars and are willing to disregard the inhumane aspect, and I find this very sad and discouraging. Most alarming of all is that I know, without question, that there are people out there who truly enjoy causing pain and fear and who get tremendous reinforcement from doing terrible things to people and animals – I’ve met a few. Unfortunately, many terrible things and “training methods” are considered “legal” or are not considered at all when it comes to animals and this needs very urgently to be changed. Please be part of the solution not part of the problem.

Something to keep in mind when you consider hiring a trainer to work with you and your dog: dog training is an unregulated profession at present. Anyone can claim to be a dog trainer; anyone can claim to be an animal behaviourist; anyone can open a dog training school; and anyone can claim the title of “certified dog trainer” or “certified dog behaviourist”.

There are many great trainers and great facilities offering courses for trainers and behaviourists based on correct learning theory, current science and well-researched information. But you need to be careful, you need to inform yourself and you need to know exactly what you want for your dog. Your dog has no choice but to depend on you.

Any good trainer should be open about the methods they use and should welcome you to attend some of their classes before asking you to commit to them. You should be completely comfortable with how they treat the dogs in their care, and the dogs, themselves, should show you how happy they are to be there and working (or not). I also believe, as with any profession, a dog trainer should be constantly updating their skill and education every way they can – keeping on top of what’s new and what’s changing.

A good place to start to look for a trainer or some good information is to take a look at the website for the Association of Pet Dog Trainers (www.apdt.com). This is an organization that is at the forefront of the movement to positive reinforcement dog training methods. It is a large group full of well-known, highly educated and knowledgeable individuals who work hard to provide great resources for pet dog owners. They offer membership to any trainer, promote positive methods and have a continuing education path for trainers to keep themselves up to date and correctly informed. Two other great resources for books, DVDs, video clips and information on positive training methods is www.dogwise.com and www.dogstardaily.com.

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