

Choke and Shock Collars: Obedience Training or Physical Punishment?

Teaching your dog how to behave will not only make him more pleasant to be around, but will also help protect his safety in a world dominated by man-made dangers such as busy streets. But this simple idea has given way to a fiction that we must control our dogs by whatever means necessary. Choke and shock collars are one example of this belief system, and are a popular way of controlling dogs. Choke and shock collars are designed to stop dogs from pulling on a leash or barking through the application of pain. The dog stops pulling or barking for one reason *because it hurts*. In some cases, however, dogs do not respond to the collars but only because they do not hurt *enough*. As a result, the caretaker or trainer may escalate the severity of the pull or switch to the even more painful pinch collar (a choke collar with spikes). Some dogs may become so desensitized to the pain that dangerously high levels of force are required to gain compliance. A dog taught not to pull with a choke collar must continue to wear it usually for months or years, and sometimes for life as pulling on leash is quickly relearned once the collar is off. And, if the caretaker is inconsistent, the dog will likely learn that it is dangerous to pull when the choke collar is on, but safe to pull when it is off, and will adjust her behavior accordingly. Because dogs learn *in very specific contexts*, this behavior change makes sense. Unfortunately, rather than realize this is how dogs learn, many caretakers mistakenly assume that the dog knows better and is just being “bad.” The result is often more painful application of the collars.

These techniques are not only unnecessary, but combined with poor timing (as is often the case) they are ineffective *and can actually be cruel*. Not only does the dog experience the mental and physical punishment, but she also does not know how to avoid it.

Whether it is choke collars, shock collars or worse, physical punishment of dogs under the guise of “training a dog for her own good” is inappropriate and unnecessary. A trainer who believes the momentary strangling of a dog to teach her not to pull on her leash is necessary is hardly a friend of dogs and certainly not worth the fee. Happily for dogs, the discussion about choke, pinch, and shock collars is increasingly becoming an academic one, as alternative means of training and managing even extra-large dogs are steadily gaining in popularity. Halters for dogs based on the same principles as halters for horses and ponies achieve terrific control mechanically (i.e., by changing leverage points) rather than through the use of pain. There are even ways to teach dogs not to pull on their leash or to stop barking by using rewards.

Indeed, the 1990's witnessed an explosion of interest in, and development of, training and behavior modification techniques that utilize positive reinforcement rather than physical punishment as the principle means of motivation. These techniques are now widespread, well-understood, user-friendly, dog-friendly and are available for virtually every training task and behavior problem. We use these methods in training all of our dogs and our dog-training classes for the general public.