

The Punishment Panacea

IF PUNISHMENT WORKS, WHY DON'T YOU USE IT?



Punishment is a loaded term. What does it mean? Possibly it means something a little different to us dog nerds than the average person. In dog training terms, punishment is something either added or taken away to **decrease** the frequency of a behaviour.

Positive punishment isn't something nice, the positive element simply means to **add** something to **decrease** a behaviour. For a dog, this may be in the form of a yank on the lead, a verbal threat, a shock, pain or even a stern look.



Negative punishment is slightly different, here we are **removing** something to **decrease** the frequency of a behaviour. This may be removing a toy, access to another dog or even removing yourself. When you remove a child's access to friends by grounding them; or remove their PlayStation so they tidy their room, these would also be examples of negative punishment.

You can't make someone feel worse and expect them to behave better

KATE BOND - GOOD AS GOLDEN

GETTING IT WRONG

Dogs are amazing, I think we can all agree on that. They don't always behave how we expect though, and we can very quickly find ourselves torn between the behaviour we would like and the behaviours that come naturally to our canine companions. An awful lot of dog behaviour problems are just dog behaviour. Our expectations are sometimes vastly out of alignment with our dogs as a species.

So, what do we do when they get it 'wrong'? Often, we default to something that has always worked in the past - punishment. Well, if it has always worked in the past, why wouldn't you?

That's the thing about punishment, it's very reinforcing for the person applying it.

When something works, we tend to latch on to it. There are some major pitfalls of punishment though, and there are very good reasons why modern evidence-based dog trainers avoid positive punishment as much as possible.





"Punishment will not change the underlying emotion driving the behaviour."

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When we punish expressions of stress or warning signals, the dog may decide to suppress those signals. The underlying emotion remains the same, even if they no longer express the emotion due to fear of punishment. Eventually, when their threshold is reached, the only option for the dog is then to advance straight to more explosive responses.

Punishing a growling dog is like removing the batteries from your smoke alarm, it won't stop the fire; it will just remove all warning.

Growling is communication, and communication is information. If a dog is growling, we need to understand the reasons and address the issues.

Grab the fire extinguisher - don't just take the batteries out of the smoke alarm.

If you'd like to stop your dog lunging at other dogs, the temptation is to add something to reduce the frequency of the lunging. You might yank their lead or tell them off and it might even work in that moment. It won't fix your problem in the long term as yanking the lead gives your dog no clear information on what you DO want them to do instead.

Punishment leaves a vacuum, when you reduce the old behaviour, what will fill the void when the underlying emotion remains unchanged?

We run the risk of entering a game of behavioural whack-a-mole.

PUNISHMENT CONFUSES YOUR DOG

Dogs simply do what works for them and sometimes that option isn't what works for us. When your dog chews the brand-new sofa cushions when left alone, that behaviour has a **function and a purpose**. They used the cushion to help them feel better in that moment, and perhaps as a mode of communication that they feel extremely stressed when left alone. They hope you will read the note they left for you and understand their distress!

When you arrive home and find the cushion, you might get angry. This might result in your dog trying to appease you with body language that can be easily mistaken for guilt. Delayed punishment serves no purpose, as too much time has elapsed for your dog to pair their actions with your response. In that moment, they are responding to your emotional state of anger and your body language with appeasement, rather than feeling guilty.

Dogs live in the here and now.



Where dogs are trained with an aversive stimulus to perform a behaviour; and that aversive was temporarily faded leaving a verbal cue, the dogs still displayed stress behaviours in response to the cue.

The cue alone became a conditioned aversive, predicting bad things would happen to the dog for non-response or an incorrect response.

BCSPCA (2018) Review of Dog Training Methods: welfare learning ability and current standards.





"Pavlov is always on your shoulder"

Dogs learn via associations and consequences, and associations are not always easy to control. During his original studies, Ivan Pavlov paired an association between the sound of a bell (fun fact: it was actually a metronome, not a bell) and food appearing, which eventually resulted in the dogs salivating to only the sound of the bell. This result was down to the association made in the dog's brain between the bell and the food. The bell had come to **predict** the food arriving, so now the sound of the bell alone elicited the same involuntary response of salivation. Cool huh?

Now imagine your dog is excitedly pulling towards a dog over the road and you yank their lead to stop them. If this happens enough times (*or one time severely enough to spark single event learning*) your dog may intensify their reaction to the other dog appearing, as the sight of the other dog now **predicts** the pain of the lead yanking.

The opposite of what you're trying to achieve.



We've covered what punishment means to us dog nerds. So, what's reinforcement then? Is it just giving dogs biscuits?

Nope. Reinforcement is adding or taking away something to **increase** the frequency of a behaviour. The thing is, **we don't get to decide what the learner finds punishing or reinforcing.**

Take my dog for example, Rupert loves water. If you spray him in the face with a water pistol, with the aim of stopping a behaviour, you would be faced with 30kg of giddy golden retriever, desperate for you to spray him again. The behaviour you're trying to stop would be reinforced, and very likely to occur more often in future. Do the same to another dog, and they're going to react very differently. Some will hide, some will be confused, and some will be frightened. For these dogs, the behaviour may reduce.

PUNISHMENT IS IN THE EYE OF THE LEARNER

If you're shouting at your dog when they're barking out of the window at the postman, and they bark more, are you punishing or reinforcing the behaviour?

Remember the definitions of punishment (decreases behaviour) and reinforcement (increases behaviour)

Consider the potential motivations of the behaviour, is it that they want to shout at the postman, or is it that they'd quite like to interact with you? If we don't spend time to understand the function and purpose of behaviours, we can waste a lot of time applying methods to change them that will be **ultimately futile.**



THE POWER OF PUNISHMENT WEARS OFF

Dogs can build up a tolerance to punishment. We witness this happen regularly with children too. The children that are often shouted at by their parents will rarely turn a hair, they have simply habituated to their parent's screaming, and it has lost the ability to decrease the frequency of their behaviour.

In dogs this might look like that lead yank that used to be super effective, is now becoming less effective over time. The lunging is creeping back, they will ignore the yank and bark regardless or they just seem oblivious to your techniques that at one time would stop the behaviour in its tracks. Why is this happening? It always worked before. So, you yank a little harder, maybe you add a stern telling off with the yank and maybe it works again to stop the behaviour as it did before.

Unless you're willing to keep climbing the ladder of severity, punishment will fail you eventually.

The problem is then the same process will happen with the harder yank on the lead, the louder telling off...

Most of us would not feel comfortable to cause physical harm to our dogs. At some point, we will not be able to climb further up the ladder of severity for fear of inflicting serious harm on our dogs.



"Punishment is battery acid on your recall and loose lead walking"

When dogs expect punishment, fear of the punishment itself can exasperate their emotional state.

Take dogs who bark and lunge at other dogs, people, or vehicles; if we punish these dogs for expressing their emotional state, they are then not only dealing with the original fear of the stimulus, but also the fear of the punishment that follows. If you've been following so far, you'll remember *Pavlov is always on your shoulder*, what associations are we pairing with the already scary stimulus?

The added fear of the punishment will serve to increase the severity of the emotional response. This may mean that your dog **reacts faster, at greater distances than before and more explosively.**

We can only help these dogs behave better by helping them feel safe, supporting them and removing their stress - not adding more.



Most of us have an idea of a stereotypical 'good dog'. This dog comes back when called, walks on a loose lead, is polite and friendly with other dogs and people, calm and playful at home and can easily come along with us to the pub and chill out while we sip a beer in the sun.

The stereotypical good dog is not compatible with punishment as a teaching tool.

If your dog doesn't come back when you call them, and they eventually come back only to be met with an angry human who scolds them, have we reinforced or **punished** the recall? You, of course, feel completely justified to tell them off. In your dog's brain, they are associating coming back to you with being told off, which will very likely cause them to come back when called less often.

PUNISHMENT IMPACTS YOUR DOG'S HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Punishment is not benign. When we punish a dog, the stress triggers the fight or flight response. This sympathetic nervous system activation leads to physical changes in the body.

Chronic stress increases cortisol, paving the way for a cascade of long-term problems for your dog. Cortisol inhibits the activity of serotonin, which is the 'feel good' hormone. It reduces quality of sleep and can make your dog more irritable.

It also reduces the activity of the prefrontal cortex, which is the part of the brain responsible for rational thought and is necessary for learning. Sustained stress decreases the ability of the prefrontal cortex to override the amygdala. **With sustained stress, fear associations are easily made but not easily extinguished.**

Chronic stress is hard on the body. It can increase inflammation, slow wound healing, decrease cognitive function, and weaken the immune system, leaving them more susceptible to infection and illness.



PUNISHMENT WILL HARM YOUR RELATIONSHIP

Perhaps the most salient of all points, punishment will impact how your dog feels about you and your relationship. Dogs are vulnerable with us as captive pets, and we are in a position of trust to care for them and keep them safe. They are completely at our mercy as their caregivers to treat them with respect, patience, love, and fairness.



We owe it to them to at least attempt to understand their language, after all, they spend their entire lives trying to understand ours; arguably with significantly more success.

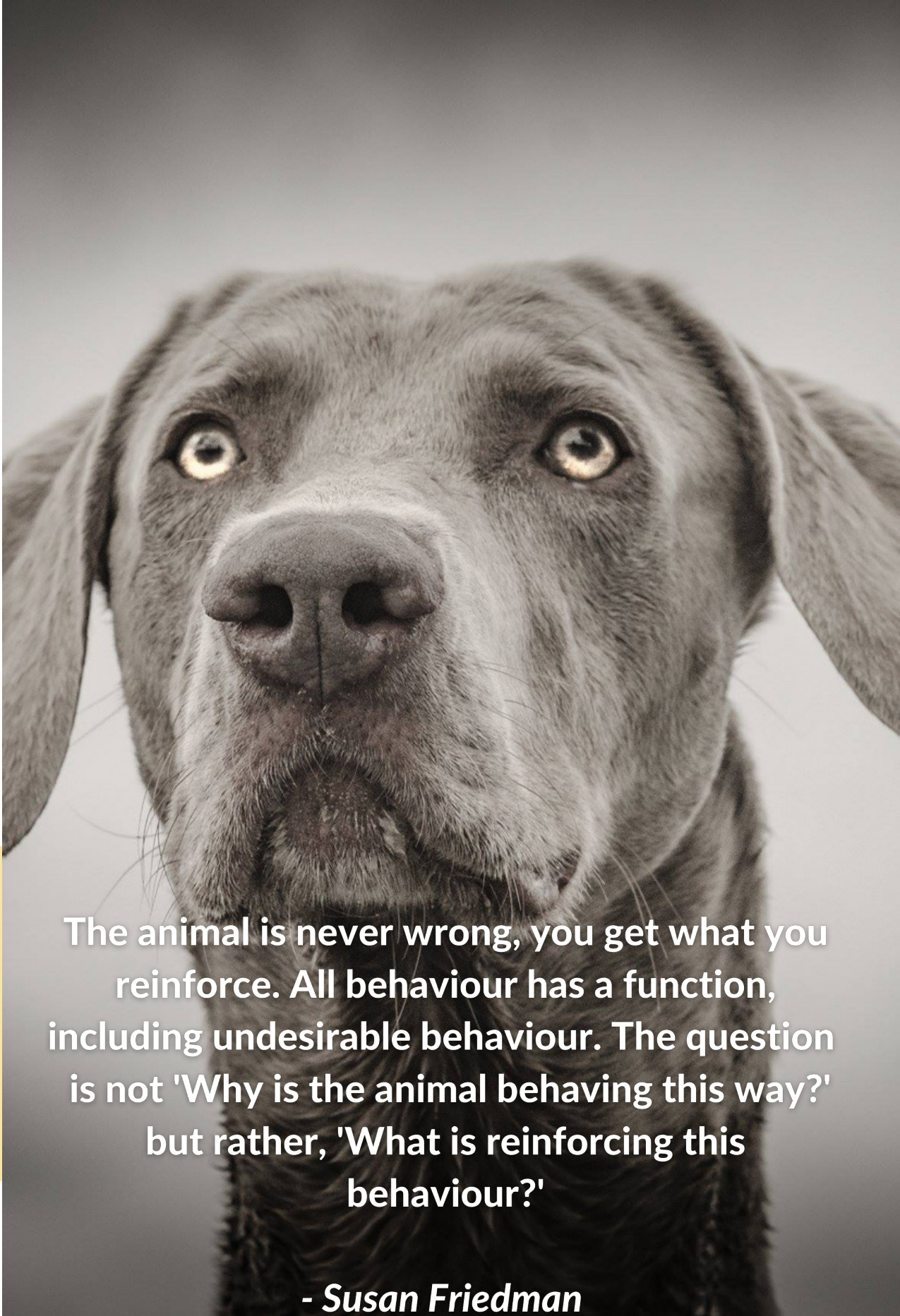
We need our dogs to look to us for support and comfort when they need it and this kind of relationship must be built on trust. Punishment is completely incompatible with the very foundations of a trusting relationship.

A strong bond is forged from the reassurance that it is safe to try and to make mistakes.

Punishment can create a negative association with us, the guardians, meaning if we punish dogs - we can become the object of fear.

Up your skills to match your ethics. Don't lower your ethics to match your skills.

STEVE MANN - IMDT



The animal is never wrong, you get what you reinforce. All behaviour has a function, including undesirable behaviour. The question is not 'Why is the animal behaving this way?' but rather, 'What is reinforcing this behaviour?'

- Susan Friedman