

Dog Training Methods

At Forever Hounds Trust we believe that training should be a fun experience for everyone involved! As such we always recommend a positive, reward based approach to dog behaviour and training. We do not advocate any training methods involving fear, force, coercion or physical punishment. Modern scientific research and understanding of canine behaviour has shown reward based methods to be the kindest and most effective way to train your dog.

The dog-adopter relationship

The majority of dog behaviour issues in the home stem from anxiety, fear, and misunderstanding between dog and adopter. Dogs do not misbehave on purpose, out of spite or because they are stubborn. Unwanted behaviours occur either because the dog does not understand what is expected of him, or because the behaviour fulfils an emotional or physical need (such as escaping from something that scares him, or getting social attention). The most reliable route to a well behaved dog is to make your dog feel safe, settled and secure at home.

Remember that you are your dog's entire world. You are the most important thing in his life, and he cannot survive without you. It is vital that your dog can trust you completely, feel totally safe around you, and look to you for support and protection. Every time your dog has a good experience with you (for example when you reward him for good behaviour, listen to his attempts to communicate, or protect him from something scary), the trust he has in you grows. Every time you use physical punishment, shout at your dog, tell him off, ignore his communication or force him to do something he finds unpleasant, that trust is damaged. The person he relies upon for everything is unpredictable and aggressive – that must be a very confusing and unhappy way to live!



The problem with punishment

- Studies have shown that punishment based training is detrimental to the welfare and wellbeing of dogs. These dogs have higher stress levels and are less optimistic than dogs trained using reward based methods.
- Punishment based methods damage the relationship between dog and adopter. These methods rely on the adopter causing fear or physical pain in order to discourage behaviour. Your dog will associate these unpleasant feelings with you, and with human interaction. This will cause your dog to become fearful of people, which in some cases can lead to aggressive behaviour.
- Many punishment based methods involve causing physical harm and pain to the dog. Equipment like choke chains, pinch collars and shock collars all rely on physically hurting the dog. They can even lead to long term injury and ongoing health problems.
- In order to have the desired effect, punishment must be delivered at exactly the right moment. This is difficult to get right. If the punishment comes just slightly too early or too late, you may inadvertently be causing a behaviour problem. Your dog will associate the punishment with whatever else is happening at the same time – for example you may be jerking on your dog's collar to punish him for pulling, but he could easily associate it with the approach of another dog. This could lead him to feel negatively about other dogs, and start acting defensively towards them.
- As mentioned above, behaviour problems stem from the dog's underlying emotional state. The actual unwanted behaviours are just a symptom of this underlying issue. By punishing a dog for showing unwanted behaviour, we are treating the symptom but not the root cause. Aside from being less effective, this approach will lead to the dog suppressing the symptoms whilst still feeling the same way. Eventually the dog will not be able to suppress the behaviour any longer, and it will resurface (often unexpectedly and more severely than before).

For example, imagine a dog who barks and lunges at other dogs on walks, because he is scared of them. Barking and lunging generally makes the other dog go away, so it helps him to feel safe, even though his owner doesn't like it. Every time he barks at another dog, his owner shouts and jerks the lead. This is unpleasant and painful, so the dog learns not to bark at other dogs.

Unfortunately, his underlying emotion has not changed – he is still scared of other dogs. In fact he is more scared than he was before, because not only are dogs frightening, but his owner shouts and hurts him when they appear. He is now scared of his owner as well. On top of that, he now has no way of keeping dogs from approaching him. Since he is no longer barking and lunging, his owner believes the problem is cured. A few weeks later, an off-lead dog starts running towards him. He doesn't lunge or bark, because he knows he'll be punished. However when the dog gets close and goes to sniff him, he cannot cope and bites the other dog.

Similarly, if you use noise-activated spray collar on a dog who howls when left home alone, you may stop the dog from howling. But the dog is still stressed and anxious when you leave the house – even more so now that his coping mechanism has been taken away.



The reward based approach

- Unlike punishment based training, the reward based approach is welfare friendly. Dogs trained using this approach have lower stress levels and are more optimistic than those trained using punishment.
- Reward based training strengthens the dog-adopter relationship rather than damaging it. Dogs trained using this method really enjoy spending time with their adopter, and learning new things.
- Reward based training does not cause any physical injury or pain to your dog.
- Timing is still important, but the consequences of getting it wrong are much less severe! There is no risk of causing a behaviour issue by inadvertently building negative associations. This gives you more time to practise your timing, without the worry of getting it wrong.
- Reward based training focuses on changing the underlying emotion behind behaviour issues, rather than just suppressing the symptoms. The aim is to improve the mental wellbeing of the dog, rather than just stop them from doing a physical behaviour. Rather than teaching the dog that he will be punished for barking at dogs in order to keep them away from him, we can teach him to feel less scared of dogs so that he doesn't need to keep them away!

How it works

The basis of this approach is simple! What we're aiming to do is:

- Set your dog up to succeed and make the right decisions
- Minimise opportunities to make the wrong decision
- Make unwanted behaviour less rewarding
- Reinforce the behaviours we want by rewarding the dog for performing them

For example, perhaps your new dog tends to jump all over visitors to the home. He's only being friendly, but he's a big dog and it isn't always appreciated! Using a reward based approach we might suggest:

1. **Setting him up to succeed** by giving him a chance to calm down before meeting visitors. When people arrive, he goes behind a dog gate with a food filled toy, and only comes out to say hello once his initial excitement levels have decreased. This physically prevents him from practising the unwanted behaviour, and puts him in a better state of mind for when he does get to say hello.
2. **Minimise the chance of him making the wrong decision** by bringing him out on a lead to say hello. This means he cannot physically jump up and practise the unwanted behaviour.
3. **Make the unwanted behaviour less rewarding** by not giving him any attention whilst he is over-excited, and not encouraging him to jump up. He's jumping up because he wants attention, so we need to teach him that it doesn't work.
4. **Reinforce the desired behaviour** by giving him attention as soon as he's calm, and not trying to jump up. To make it easier for him, we could teach him to sit when meeting people. As soon as he sits, he gets the attention he's been craving! He'll soon learn that sitting calmly is the best way to get what he wants.

This is just one example, but reward based training can be used effectively to teach any desired behaviour, and improve any behaviour problem. If you are unsure how to use reward based training for a specific training issue, please get in touch with us for behaviour advice.

The information provided in this document provides general guidance on the matters outlined and is not intended to replace the need for you to take qualified and appropriate behaviour/training advice on these matters.

Please remember, that as an owner of a Forever Hounds Trust dog you have access to our team of qualified behaviourists and FREE behaviour and training advice. No matter what your behaviour or training question is, we are here to help. You can contact the team by emailing: behaviour@foreverhoundstrust.org

Written by Rachel Cartwright, MSc, BSc (Hons) for Forever Hounds Trust, 2020. Reviewed April 2025

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