



## Pet Training, Management and Care: We Now Know Enough to Stop Shocking our Pets

*An Open Letter to Pet Industry Representatives Regarding the Use of Shock in Animal Training*

### **Abstract**

Shocking pet dogs remains a common, if controversial, training practice worldwide. In this open letter, Pet Professional Guild (PPG) combines decades of research, the opinions of certified animal behaviorists, and the question of ethics to explain why using electric shock in the name of training and care is both ineffective and harmful. PPG concludes that shocking constitutes a form of abuse towards pets, and, given that there are highly effective, positive training alternatives, should no longer be a part of the current pet industry culture of accepted practices, tools or philosophies.

### **Introduction**

This document will present and attempt to answer three questions PPG believes to be key for those leading, guiding and credentialing pet industry professionals:

1. Can professional associations and credentialing bodies work within the confines of applied animal behavior without endorsing or enabling shock collar practitioners?
2. Can pet industry associations and credentialing bodies redefine the rules for humane hierarchies simply by applying a layer of ethics that rules out certain equipment choices deemed highly aversive and invasive?
3. As a minimum and first step, should members of professional associations be identified by training philosophy and tools of choice, enabling pet owners to make informed and transparent choices on behalf of their pets?

Since its inception in 2012, PPG's position has been that "the use of electronic stimulation, or 'shock' or 'e-collars' to care for, manage and train/modify the behavior of pet animals is simply not necessary." (Note: For the purposes of this document, electronic stimulation devices include - -but are not limited to -- products often referred to as e-collars, training collars, shock collars, e-touch, stimulation, tingle, TENS unit collar, remote trainers, and e-prods.) In 2017, can there really still be a debate over the issue of using pain as a "method" of animal training? Decades of peer-reviewed, scientific studies show, whether discussing dogs, humans, dolphins or elephants, that

electric shock as a form of training to teach or correct a behavior is ineffective at best, and physically and psychologically damaging at worst.

Renowned board certified animal behaviorist and veterinarian, Dr. Karen Overall (2005) states: “There are now terrific scientific and research data that show the harm that shock collars can do behaviorally. At the July 2005, International Veterinary Behavior Meeting, held in conjunction with the American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior and American College of Veterinary Behaviorists research meetings, data were presented by E. Schalke, J. Stichnoth, and R. Jones-Baade that documented these damaging effects...There is no longer a reason for people to remain misinformed. Let me make my opinion perfectly clear: Shock is not training - in the vast majority of cases it meets the criteria for abuse.”

Ziv (2017) condenses a number of studies and surveys to review the data on the relationship between the use of electronic collars and dogs’ behavior and concludes that, “given the available data and in order to avoid risking the dogs’ welfare, trainers should avoid using electronic collars when training dogs.” Yet, in spite of the decades of studies, there is still plethora of organizations, associations and councils responsible for the representation, guidance and certification of pet industry professionals adhering to the belief that shock is an acceptable way to train, care for and manage pets. Yet these associations play a critical role in establishing and recommending best practices, education, leadership and technical standards in their respective arena. With this role comes the obligation to take a transparent and consistent position on important and urgent issues, including training practices and equipment use. This does not mean said organizations need to remove or inhibit required levels of professional autonomy by practicing, ethical individuals. Indeed, PPG believes that a line based on research, science, and ethics should be drawn as to what are, and are not, acceptable business practices in terms of applied animal behavior (ABA), core principles, and informed consent. Wherever possible “practitioners should base their choices of training methods on scientific data.” (Ziv, 2017).

The fundamental concepts of facilitating professionals to operate within a code of conduct and empowering them to maintain professional autonomy are not mutually exclusive. According to PPG’s *Open Letter on Defining, Determining and Maintaining Best Practices within our Force-Free Organization* (2012), professionals “must be allowed autonomy to work within the guidelines of their professional code of practice,” and “[PPG] members are encouraged to use their individual methods of choice from within governing principles and guidelines.” (Pet Professional Guild, 2012). This statement references PPG’s *Guiding Principles*, which are supported by a number of clear, simple non-negotiable best practices. These include completely eschewing the use of aversive training tools, such as shock, prong, or choke. In addition, PPG members agree they will not approach training or pet care via any method that works primarily through the application of pain, force or fear (Pet Professional Guild, 2012).

Industry associations and credentialing bodies must take full responsibility for the fact that pet owners are encouraged to purchase services from their members purely by association, and through their efforts to market said members to the general pet owning public. Unfortunately, this does not take into account the vast differences in methodology and philosophy that may

exist across an organization's membership body. In other words, there is no stated transparency in terms of the risks and benefits associated with the services provided, nor any differentiation between those members who practice a force-free training philosophy, and those who still risk physical and/or psychological harm to pets through their approach, philosophy and/or tool choice. In addition, there are no ramifications for members that misrepresent their services through the omission of information in a membership directory, or through their individual professional websites. This begs the question as to how consumers are protected in the absence of compulsory transparency across, or within the membership organization. As it stands, pet owners who are steered towards a professional organization through its marketing efforts search, at their own peril, through an assortment of trainers operating at opposite ends of the ethical and moral spectrum.

### The Use and Application of Shock

Applying an electric shock provides no effective strategy for an animal to learn a new or alternative behavior; it simply inflicts pain and risks making him fearful, anxious and/or aggressive. Generally speaking, a pet owner's main goals when shocking their pet are, firstly, to punish perceived misbehavior in the moment and, secondly, reduce future recurrences of the undesirable behavior. Shocking is a form of punishment and, as such, can only achieve the first goal, and harshly. In the absence of a constructional approach whereby new and more appropriate behaviors are built, most punishment outside a laboratory environment (where all components can be systematically manipulated) is extremely unreliable and encased by unintended consequences.

There can be no doubt that electric shock is a punisher, and for punishment to be effective as a means to training a dog -- or any other animal -- there are three critical elements that must be fulfilled: consistency, timing and intensity. First, the punishment must occur every time the unwanted behavior occurs. Second, it must be administered within, at most, a second or two of the behavior. Third, it must be unpleasant enough to stop the behavior. To reiterate, in the real world outside science laboratories, meeting these three criteria is virtually impossible for a dog training professional, and most certainly for a dog owner. Citing a variety of studies, Ziv (2017) concludes that "even when experienced trainers operate [shock] collars, the welfare of the dogs could be compromised," and states it to be "likely that the threat to dogs' welfare would be even greater in the hands of unskilled dog owners, who might lack the timing and consistency needed for this type of training to be successful...due to the aversive nature of these devices and the likelihood of training ineffectiveness, their use can be abusive."

### The Consequences of Using Shock

Pets are cognitive, intelligent creatures that experience emotions such as fear, anxiety, and joy. They are subject to the same laws of ABA as any other living organism. According to psychology professor, Dr. Susan Friedman, who has pioneered the application of ABA to captive and companion animals: "Punishment doesn't teach learners what to do instead of the problem behavior. Punishment doesn't teach caregivers how to teach alternative behaviors. Punishment

is really two aversive events – the onset of a punishing stimulus and the forfeiture of the reinforcer that has maintained the problem behavior in the past.” (Friedman, 2010). Especially troubling for pet professionals is the notion that punishment requires an increase in the intensity of the aversive stimulus for it to have any hope of maintaining behavior reduction.

Forcing dogs to comply to avoid being shocked does not enhance the canine-human relationship, nor does it create an environment where healthy learning can take place. Rather, a pet repeatedly subjected to aversive stimulation, shock, may go into a state of “shut down,” or a global suppression of behavior. This is frequently mistaken for a “trained” pet, as the pet may remain subdued and offer few or no behaviors. In extreme cases, pets may refuse to perform any behavior at all, known as “learned helplessness.” In such cases, animals may try to isolate themselves to avoid incurring the aversive stimulation. This is evidently counterproductive to training new, more acceptable behaviors. (O’Heare, 2011).

Some common problems resulting from the use of electronic stimulation devices include, but are not limited to:

### ***Infliction of Stress and Pain***

Even at the lowest setting, electronic stimulation devices present an unknown stimulus to pets which is, at best, neutral and, at worse, frightening and/or painful. In many instances the shock is completely unpredictable for the pet, who does not know when or why it is coming. This can only add to overall levels of fear and stress. Pets conform under the shock stimulus in order to escape or avoid the terrifying and/or painful electric shock. Avoidance learning is very real and the threat of pain is just as capable of inducing stress, fear and emotional damage as the pain itself. By definition this makes the stimulus aversive. (*Note: Aversive means something unpleasant or frightening that the pet seeks to avoid or escape, as opposed to a pleasant stimulus that a pet seeks out voluntarily.*) In addition, electronic stimulation regularly causes physiological pain and psychological stress, often exhibited by vocalization, urination, defecation, fleeing, or complete shut-down. In extreme cases, electronic stimulation devices have also been known to cause muscle contraction and respiratory and cardiac paralysis (Overall, 2013).

### ***Global Suppression or “Shut-Down”***

A pet repeatedly subjected to aversive stimulation may go into a state of “shut down,” or a global suppression of behavior. This is frequently mistaken for a “trained” pet, as the pet remains subdued and offers few, or no behaviors. In extreme cases, pets may refuse to perform any behavior at all, known as “learned helplessness.” In such cases, pets may try to isolate themselves to avoid incurring the aversive stimulation. This is evidently counterproductive to training new, more acceptable behaviors (O’Heare, 2011).

### ***Generalization***

For new, more appropriate behaviors to become reliable in random environments, they must be accessed, reinforced and then practiced so a pet is able to transfer them to any context or

situation (known as “generalization”). When using shock to train or manage a pet, the pet must be repeatedly subjected to the aversive stimulus for the behavior to appear resolved, when it is, in fact, only suppressed. In such cases, the pet still has not learned a more appropriate alternative behavior. In addition, as the pet is most likely still experiencing a negative emotional state, such as fear or anxiety, he is susceptible to even more problematic behavior fallout.

### ***Escalation***

If a change in behavior is not seen immediately, users of aversive tools and those inexperienced in behavior fallout often opt to increase the frequency, duration or intensity of the application. Unfortunately, this can only result in the pet attempting to escape or avoid the stimulus with even greater intensity, thus often compounding or exaggerating the problem behavior for which the shock was applied to resolve. This creates a counterproductive paradigm whereby the pet simply learns to fear the stimulus, the context, and/or the person delivering it. In addition, some pets tend to be “stoic” and may fail to show any kind of fear response, irrespective of increased levels of anxiety or frustration. There is also the risk that pets may become habituated to the sense of fear or anxiety, once again causing the trainer or owner to increase the level and/or frequency of the aversive stimulus. It has been scientifically proven that fear and stress caused in such situations can have a significant effect on a pet's well-being due to increasing cortisol levels and heart rate, not to mention the psychological impact (O’Heare, 2005).

### ***Redirected Aggression***

Pets subjected to repeated aversive stimulation may be respondently conditioned to associate the fear and/or pain with certain contextual cues in their environment. As an example, using an aversive sound such as an air horn to interrupt barking risks pairing the owner or trainer with the unpleasant stimulus and, in particular, the hand or arm that is reaching out while using the tool. Repeated instances may generalize to the pet attempting to flee. If the pet feels, however, that flight is not possible or a safe or reliable course of action, he may instead start acting aggressively toward any arm or hand movement, or any approach behavior whatsoever. O’Heare (2007) discusses that “shock can create significant levels of frustration and reduce the dog’s bite threshold.” O’Heare cites a study by Polsky (2000) where data implies that electric shock containment fencing elicits redirected aggression in dogs with no aggressive history.

### ***Suppressed Aggression***

The use of aversive stimuli is counterindicated in pets with aggression. This is because the behavior may only be suppressed rather than extinguished, and may thus resurface at any time without warning, generally in a more severe display. Using aversive stimuli to reduce behaviors, such as barking, lunging and growling may suppress signals that warn of a more serious, and potentially imminent behavior, such as biting. Without ritualized aggression behaviors, people and other pets will receive no warning before the pet subjected to punishment feels forced to resort to biting.

*PPG holds that desensitization and counterconditioning are the only ethical and effective paradigms in which to treat aggression in pets. Protocols such as these help positively impact*

*the pet's emotional state from one of fear and/or anxiety to one that is more happy and relaxed, and thus able to learn new behaviors.*

### Best Practice

Humane and effective animal training procedures lay the foundation for any animal's healthy socialization and training, and help avoid the onset of behavioral issues. In PPG's view, the general pet-owning public must be better served by professional organizations and associations to help them ensure their pets live in nurturing and stable environments where they are able to maintain a positive emotional state and feel safe. This will, in turn, play a significant role in preventing behavior problems and enhancing dog bite safety protocols.

#### a) Transparency and Consumer Advocacy

Many shock collar trainers market themselves under verbiage and marketing slogans such as "force-free," "positive relationship," "natural methods," "relationship building," "positive only," "no food necessary," and so on. These are all taglines that are bandied around the industry, but mislead unsuspecting owners looking for humane ways to train their pets. They are carefully crafted to appeal to pet guardians who may not always understand the various training methods available, or the fallout and unintended consequences of making the wrong choice. They thus do not provide consumers the autonomy to make ethical decisions on behalf of their pets. This, compounded with the inability of a pet to offer informed consent, further questions the ethics of such training practices. The foundation of anyone working in behavioral sciences must always be to do no harm.

#### b) Scientific Training Methods: "Do No Harm" must become aligned with "Do Good"

All animals are motivated by food. Food is necessary for survival. It is therefore a powerful primary reinforcer and a critical component when used correctly as part of a strategic training or management plan. For behavior consultants who engage in behavior change programs where it is necessary to change a pet's emotional reaction to a problematic stimulus, food is essential. When modifying observable behaviors such as growling, lunging and biting that are often manifestations of a fearful and/or anxious emotional state, the goal must be to change the underlying emotional response, thus enabling the dog to learn a new, more appropriate behavior.

It is frequently misunderstood that fear is an emotion and not a behavior. One cannot simply "train it out." Indeed, fear is often the underlying emotional state to aggressive behavior, and requires the implementation of a different set of scientific protocols and a greater understanding of emotional learning and animal behavior. A review of the scientific literature recommends the use of food as a reinforcer in desensitization and counterconditioning protocols that are specifically aimed at addressing the underlying emotions of fear and/or anxiety. In reality, using food to counter condition emotional responses is the most widely accepted method for treating fear-based behaviors (Overall, 2013).

#### c) Humane Hierarchy

A common trend across professional animal training and behavior associations is the promotion and application of a so-called humane hierarchy, and there are several versions available. A number of key animal behavior and training associations promote the use of a specific hierarchy to their membership, and deem it acceptable to move up through the hierarchy when working with owners and their pets. Some humane hierarchy models are accompanied by pages of explanation, detail and academic citations, while others are wonderfully graphic and detail each level. Levels generally start using management strategies and antecedent control moving then to positive reinforcement, i.e. rewarding a desirable behavior to increase the likelihood of that behavior being repeated, and eventually build up to positive punishment (which would include electric shock) to stop an undesirable behavior via the use of force or pain or any other aversive (to the animal) means. Members of any given professional body are encouraged to work within the guidelines of these hierarchies, and they are promoted to members as a tool to utilize when initiating training and behavior change programs.

O’Heare (2014) presents that the least intrusive effective behavior intervention (LIEBI) model is “proposed as a ‘best practice,’ because of its careful attention to ethical responsibility... Considerately working through the process of finding the least intrusive effective intervention is a wise choice, partly because it avoids excess side effects associated with highly intrusive methods.” However, if so-called humane hierarchies work in isolation from any non-negotiable best practices or ethical guidelines, ultimately they fail the pet, the owner, the professional, and the entire industry. Progressing up the hierarchy to more invasive and aversive protocols is merely a matter of time for individuals who are not proficient in their craft, or do not have the requisite scientific knowledge or education to understand why this strategy is so problematic in the first place. Other professionals simply skip through the levels, preferring to commence their training programs using the most aversive and invasive tools at hand.

## Conclusion

It is important not be fooled by deceptive marketing terms (e.g. vibrating, e-touch, remote, stimulation, tingle, static) for shock collars. The primary reason shock collars are effective in stopping behavior is because they are painful, and it is time for pet professionals and associations to collaborate on this central issue, stop inflicting pain masquerading as training, and take shock off the table once and for all. Rather, by focusing on education and advocacy to ensure a better-informed pet owner who seeks out humane alternatives, consumer demand would automatically be reduced, and real progress could be made in reaching the end goal.

Ziv (2017) notes that there is “no evidence to suggest that aversive training methods are more effective than reward based training methods” and that, in fact, studies suggest “the opposite might be true – in both pets and working dogs.” Ziv (2017) suggests a new line of research to “examine how humane, reward-based methods can be improved in order to facilitate better communication between humans and dogs. In turn, such outcomes will allow dogs to modulate their stress, and at the same time improve their ability to effectively understand and respond to the behavior displayed towards them.”

We already have enough research to conclude that using fear or physical punishment in the name of training or care of our pets is ineffective and potentially harmful (in some cases, lethal). We also know that countless professional organizations and industry experts condemn physical punishment and urge pet owners to seek professionals who advocate for and, instead, practice positive behavior modification.

However, there is a third reason to advocate against the use of physical punishment, and that is a moral one. Most pet owners, if asked, would most likely say they do not punish their pets, or deliberately place them in frightening situations to try to encourage new, or more appropriate behaviors. Yet the same owners will unwittingly take advice from training professionals who practice “methods” such as hitting, shocking and physically correcting a pet using a leash, or an array of aversive tools. By using different terminology, a professional may feel justified in physically punishing a pet while dispensing corresponding advice to pet owners, without acknowledging that he/she is, in fact, damaging the pet’s physical and mental well-being.

In civilized society, it is generally agreed that physical force is not an effective or acceptable way for adults to resolve their differences. Bearing this in mind, it should come as no surprise that physically correcting pets, like hitting children or adults, causes more problems than it solves, such as the many outlined above. It is time to stop physically harming our pets in the name of training. By working together, professional animal training and behavior associations have the ability to achieve this, and successfully reach the ultimate goal, which must be to do no harm to the animals in our charge, and improve the welfare of pets all over the world.

The bottom line is that it is entirely possible for pet industry representatives to support professional autonomy and the use of a humane hierarchy, while also taking a stand and position against the use and application of electric shock as a “training method.” As such, PPG calls on fellow industry professionals and associations, animal welfare organizations, and professional animal training and behavior bodies worldwide to stand together, to collectively reach out to, engage and educate pet owners in the implementation and practice of humane, kind and effective training tools and techniques. Rather than rely on aversive means, PPG encourages all organizations to embrace the vast body of scientific research that details the many advantages of positive training methods, and publicly say “no” to any technique that causes pain or fear -- including those administered via equipment that delivers electric shocks.

*Those of us who have the privilege and responsibility to represent pet professionals and, consequently, reach the wider audience comprised of pet owners and caretakers, are in the optimal position to make significant changes across our industry, within our representing bodies, and for the benefit of the pets we serve, the owners we service, and the professionals we represent. The time to achieve this is now, let’s shape the future!*

## **References**

Friedman, S. (2010, March). [What's Wrong with This Picture? Effectiveness Is Not Enough](#). *APDT Journal*.

O'Heare, J. (2011). *Empowerment Training*. Ottawa, ON: BehaveTech Publishing.

O'Heare, J. (2007). *Aggressive Behavior in Dogs*. Ottawa, ON: BehaveTech Publishing.

O'Heare, J. (2005). *Canine Neuropsychology*. Ottawa, ON: DogPsych Publishing.

O'Heare, J. (2014). [The least intrusive effective behavior intervention \(LIEBI\) algorithm and levels of intrusiveness table: a proposed best practices model. Version 6.0.](#)

Overall, K.L. (2013). *Manual of Clinical Behavioral Medicine for Dogs and Cats*. St. Louis, MO: Elsevier Saunders.

Overall, K.L. (2005). [An open letter from Dr. Karen Overall regarding the use of shock collars.](#)

Pet Professional Guild. (2012). [Guiding Principles.](#)

Pet Professional Guild. (2012). [Defining, Determining and Maintaining Best Practices within Our Force Free Organization.](#)

Pet Professional Guild. (2012). [Position Statement on the Use of Shock in Animal Training.](#)

Polsky, R. (2010). [Can Aggression in Dogs Be Elicited Through the Use of Electronic Pet Containment Systems?](#) *Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science* (3) 4 345-357.

Ziv, G. (2017). The Effects of Using Aversive Training Methods in Dogs – A Review. *Journal of Veterinary Behavior: Clinical Applications and Research* (19) 50-60.