

CABTSG PRIMER IN BEHAVIOUR

INTRODUCTION

The information here is basic but helps to prepare the reader for some of the questions that are frequently asked of staff in veterinary clinics.

Feel free to print and distribute the material, but please don't alter or adapt it without asking for permission.

The primer is primarily intended for use by nurses and vets and is especially suitable for nurses undergoing training.

CABTSG also runs complete courses that deal with the more complex aspects of behavioural therapy and the issues surrounding it (legal, ethical and medical).

Please visit us often to find out what else is available; why not even become a member!

www.cabtsq.org

Basic training

Training is based upon the principles of 'learning theory' researched in the early part of the 20th century by scientists such as Pavlov and Thorndike.

Dogs do not recognise the supremacy of human evolution and they will not respond to commands simply because people are bigger and noisier than they are.

The most successful method of training is to use rewards for desirable behaviour so that it will be repeated.

Coercion and physical contact are rarely necessary, especially when using lure or clicker based training methods.

First a few definitions:

Reward and punishment

The concepts of reward and punishment are often confusing, and it is easiest to think in terms of action and outcome.

If a particular action (behaviour) leads to an outcome that feels good *to the dog* then it is likely that the dog will repeat that action. In this case the outcome is *rewarding*.

If the outcome is *unpleasant* to the dog then the action is less likely to be repeated. The outcome is *punishing*.

The key point is that it is the animal's *response* that defines whether the outcome is a punishment or a reward.

A reward must be sufficiently *pleasant* so that the animal is keen to repeat the action to gain the reward. But what is rewarding for one dog may not be rewarding for another. Think in terms of human experience.

A box of chocolates is commonly given as a 'reward' for doing someone a good turn. However if you do not like chocolate and you thought that the *only* reward you would ever get for running errands for your neighbour was more chocolate then you might stop being quite so helpful and find something else to do instead.

In this case the chocolate is a *punishment*.

Likewise a punishment must be sufficiently *unpleasant* to make the animal reluctant to repeat the action to avoid a repeat of the experience.

Dogs will often bark in the kennel room in an attempt to gain attention. A common reaction is to shout at them to "Be Quiet!". This gives them the attention they desire. In this case the reprimand is a *reward*.

Timing

Timing is important.

Rewards need to be delivered at the same time, or at most within 2 seconds of the dog performing the behaviour to have maximum effect.

Punishment must be delivered immediately the dog performs an undesirable behaviour.

Punishing a dog for something it did several hours or even a few minutes ago (such as chewing furniture while you are out) is simply pointless and does nothing more than distress the dog and makes you appear unpredictable and psychotic!

Positive reinforcement:

This is *giving* a dog a *rewarding pleasant experience* that *increases* the chance of the behaviour being repeated.

Negative reinforcement:

This is *taking away* an *unpleasant experience* so that the chance of a behaviour being repeated is *increased*.

For example, a dog might learn to nudge a button in order to turn off a loud noise.

Negative reinforcement and punishment are not the same thing!

Training should be started as soon as the puppy arrives in his new home, and be involved with fun and enjoyment.

Training sessions should be short and sweet and followed by an enjoyable game.

Punishment of young animals needs to be handled delicately.

Shouting, scruffing and smacking are not necessary and can lead to problems of aggression.

Physical punishment is likely to make an animal fearful and mistrustful of handling.

A simple, sharp 'No' is usually enough for most young dogs!

If not, then using one of the methods described later is the next step.

The use of physical punishment may result in the animal becoming aggressive:

A dog that has an elevated sense of its own status is more likely to try and bite you.

A fearful dog may react defensively and bite you if you cause it to be frightened of you.

If a dog growls at you it is important to try to understand why and not over react or lose your temper. It is possible that it is just trying to warn you that it is frightened.

The scruffing and shaking of dogs are cardinal sins.

It is often stated that a bitch will grab and scruff a puppy and that our punishment should mimic this.

Unfortunately a puppy will see little in common between its mother lifting it a few inches off the ground whilst growling and a human shaking it and shouting. By doing this you are removing the dog's option to escape and probably terrifying it in the process.

Many dogs will realise that their only options are to respond with greater aggression or simply to freeze and wait for the punishment to be over.

If you manage to avoid getting bitten you are lucky, and when the dog grows to a size where it feels able to defend itself don't be surprised if it turns on you!

Above all, remember that we are supposed to be the intelligent ones, and ought to be able to think our way around a problem.

It is not a good idea to teach a dog how to be aggressive, particularly when it is also learning about your weaknesses at the same time.

Training basic commands such as sit, lie down and stay should begin within the first 3 months of the pup's life.

There is no need to wait until it is older although it is important that training is done without force at this age.

A pup that has begun to learn about training at a young age will be much more able to learn later on.

Commands should always be preceded with the dog's name and spoken in a quiet and cheerful voice. If you start training in a quiet situation such as in the home then using a quiet voice will teach the dog to concentrate rather than ignore you.

Shouting at dogs is no better than shouting at people who do not understand English!

Don't restrict training to one place. Dogs that are only trained once a week at training class may become perfectly obedient in the local church hall, or wherever the classes are held, but be uncontrollable elsewhere! But if the dog learns to obey in a number of different places and for a variety of handlers learning becomes 'generalised' and the dog learns to respond to commands equally well no matter where it is, or who is giving the command.

Owners will often say that their dog behaves well at classes but not on a walk. This is usually because of distractions and a lack of practice. Training in a variety of contexts with highly motivating rewards (such as when the dog is already hungry or awaiting a game) will overcome this for most dogs.

Leashes, Collars and other paraphernalia

Choke chains

These are still popular, but are easily misused.

There is now plenty of evidence that choke chains contribute to laryngeal paralysis and fractures within the larynx. They can also interfere with the supply of blood to the head, causing bleeding inside the eye or a lack of oxygen to the brain.

All are very serious conditions.

If a dog is still pulling and needs regular correction then the choke chain is not working and should be abandoned.

A choke chain is also not a secure method of restraint, and dogs can get out of them.

A much better alternative to the choke chain is the ½ check collar; a collar with a loop of chain inserted. When correctly sized these cannot tighten enough to cause damage.

Halters e.g. Halti®/Gentle Leader®

These are much more efficient and safe for use by the general public and are the preferred method of control.

Dogs secured using these types of halter find it harder to issue aggressive threats to other dogs and do not feel as restricted by them when challenged.

For these reasons, and the greater comfort they afford, dogs tend to be less aggressive than when restrained using a choke chain or plain collar.

The most successful and secure way to use a halter is with two leads or preferably a 'double ended' lead with a clip on each end. Attach one clip to the halter and the other to the dog's conventional collar. This will give the owner control of both the dog's head and neck and prevent the dog from pulling backwards out of the halter.

The halter needs to be correctly fitted; usually the strap around the back of the neck should be reasonably tight. Once fitted correctly it is very useful to stitch the adjustment strap so that it cannot slip. Otherwise the halter will become loose as the strap slips.

Not many dogs will accept wearing a halter straight away. It should be introduced gradually using an association with food reward and play. If a dog is taken for a walk in halter without being given a chance to get use to it first it is likely that the dog will try to get it off and may never learn to accept it.

Check halters regularly for signs of stretching.

Chest harnesses.

Flat strap harnesses may be useful for dogs with upper respiratory disease or neck pain, but they offer virtually no control. A dog in a harness can pull very hard.

There is another type of harness that employs a thin cord that loops under the axilla.

Under tension when the dog pulls these apply quite a lot of pressure to this area and have been known to cause damage. Since there are many important blood vessels and nerves in the axilla these types of harnesses should be treated with care. On hot days they often create sores and chaffing to dogs with short coats. These harnesses are available with foam rubber padding around the cord that loops under the axilla, but care still needs to be exercised as the foam rubber can wear through or slip exposing the thin cord.

Collars

A flat or rounded leather or nylon collar is the most practical method of carrying the identity tag that is a legal requirement in the UK.

They should be fitted to allow about two to three fingers worth of excess space around the neck.

Too loose enables the collar to come off or get snagged on branches, too tight can cause breathing difficulties.

The tightness of the collar should be checked regularly to ensure that it has not changed as the material shrinks or stretches or if the animal loses or puts on weight. Such checks should be carried out every time you see an animal because many owners are not aware that some collars can become tighter with time, especially when the collar gets soaked or the dog's coat gets thicker in winter.

Clickers

A clicker is a small plastic device with a metal tongue inside it.

When the metal part is pressed and released it emits a loud double click.

This is usually a completely new noise to most animals.

On its own the click is meaningless, and so it is necessary to show the dog what the click might mean.

About thirty times the trainer will click the clicker and then throw down a food reward within 5 seconds of the click.

The dog learns to associate the noise with the fact that food is about to be dropped, and now the click can be used in training.

In simple terms the click is used to pinpoint behaviour that we want to encourage.

If for example we ask the dog to sit, then as the dog's bottom touches the ground we give a click and then drop a food reward.

The timing of the click is crucial because it is the click that tells the dog that it is doing something right.

The click noise should never be used to attract a dog's attention; for example if a dog is running around the garden and you want it to come in. If you click then the dog will actually think it is being rewarded for running in the garden. The click must come when the dog comes in after hearing the command!

Clicker training can be used for teaching dogs to perform all sorts of behaviour, as well as to treat behaviour problems.

Training discs

These are another commonly used training tool, and are the almost exact opposite of the clicker.

Once again the dog needs to learn what the sound of the discs means before they can be used.

Essentially the dog is taught to associate the sound of the discs rattling with the fear of failure to get a reward that was expected.

This fear of failure combines with the startling noise of the discs to create a useful tool for interrupting behaviours that are undesirable.

Both clickers and training discs require expertise to use them, and it is advisable to seek training through appropriate books, videos or classes before using them

Commands

The word 'command' is actually a poor choice when talking about training, because it gives the impression that the animal understands what we are saying right from the outset.

The truth is that dogs do not understand a word that we are saying and bellowing commands at a dog is rather like trying to teach someone a foreign language by shouting at them.

Teaching Heel

It is best to practice these commands before the dog's meal when it is hungry.

Get some food treats, and put the dog's collar, halter and leash on.

The best place to start practising leash work is in the garden because this is a familiar environment and contains few distractions.

By doing this you are preparing a routine that will help the pup cope on its first walks in public places.

These will be a bit scary, and the association with food rewards helps to reduce this.

It also means that training can be started before the pup's vaccination course is complete.

Allow the dog plenty of slack to move around on the leash, but every time the pup comes close, i.e. within 2 feet of you, say 'Heel' and drop a food reward.

If the dog remains close, repeat the command and reward every couple of seconds, but stop whenever the dog moves away from you.

Change direction abruptly and frequently so that the pup has to watch and follow you.

If he or she pulls ahead of you stop and walk in the opposite direction.

After this training give the dog a game and some fuss.

Within three or four 5-10 minute sessions the dog will be spending more of the time close to you rather than inspecting the flowerbeds or whatever.

He or she will also tend to come close when 'heel' is called, ready for a food reward.

When the pup is ready, start to do the same on a walk in the park.

Decide upon a distance from you that you do not want your dog to walk beyond and picture this in your mind.

Typically they should not walk further forward than your footfalls.

Keeping the dog on a slack leash, every time he or she walks beyond this point in front of you, stop still without talking or even looking at your dog until the dog comes close again. Then move forwards again.

Keep changing direction and stopping so that the pup rapidly learns to stay close and watch what you are doing.

Consistently reward the pup for staying close.

Teaching sit

Put some pieces of extra tasty food in a pot.

These should be small; no larger than your smallest fingernail.

With the dog on front of you, hold a piece of food out so that the dog can sniff it and is aware of what is on offer.

Saying the command 'sit' move the piece of food from just in front of the dog's nose backwards over the top of its head so that the dog follows the treat with its eyes and nose.

In this position most dogs will sit, as soon as this happens praise the dog and give a food. But make sure that the dog remains sitting as you give the reward. If the dog stands up as he gets the treat, then he is being rewarded for standing not sitting.

Repeat this in a number of different places (house, garden, on a walk) until the dog is responding well to the command sit and the 'lure' of the food becomes less important.

You should find that you can gradually convert the upward hand movement into a simple raised hand gesture; it is useful for a dog to be able to respond to a hand signal as well as a voice command so this is useful.