

Electric Collar Training Reviewed By Conni Borwick

Many pet owners are offered training with shock collars for their dogs. Most do not understand the implications of such training and the negative effects it has on their dogs. Trainers promoting this type of training fail to mention that electronic collars have been banned or severely restricted in Denmark, Germany, Switzerland, Wales and most of Australia. **If the international community sees shock collars as a problem why would we think they are appropriate training tools?**

Dr. Karen Overall, MA, VMD, PhD. Dipl. ACVB, ABS Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist, states “I have been surprised at how often those who support shock ignore the fact that cessation may not be a hallmark of ‘improved behavior,’ especially when the welfare of the animal is concerned.” Despite some trainers claims that clients found their dogs to become “obedient” with such shock training, Overall states “obedient dogs can be quite distressed and can suffer from profound anxiety while complying with a request.” Furthermore, Dr. Overall concludes that this method violates many of the rules of learning behavior: “Any dog who stops reacting to any stimuli in such a conditioned situation is experiencing learned helplessness, **NOT OBEDIENCE.**” (Journal of Veterinary Behavior, vol.2. pgs. 1-5).

Although the use of shock collars is promoted as a quick way to train a dog, dog owners need to be wary of the after effects of such training. In a landmark paper published in 2004, Schilder and Van der Borg University of Utrecht, Utrecht, The Netherlands, studied German Shepherd dogs that were guard dog trained, to document the long term behavioral effects of shock collar training. The findings showed that these dogs had a lowered ear and lowered tail and body postures when free walking and more stress related behaviors than did the dogs that were not shocked. Some of these behaviors are repetitive lip licking, becoming context dependent on their handlers, higher Cortisol levels, and alterations in the HPA axis. Although these dogs showed these problematic behaviors they continued to work, which suggests that their handlers could have used other humane methods to develop the working team relationship with a our dogs. (Applied Animal Behavior Science 85 (2004) 319-334.)

A recent study conducted by E. Schalke, et. al. (2006) investigated two key physiological measures of stress; heart rate and cortisol levels. Three groups were utilized: Shock, control and idiopathic shock. The authors concluded that the “misuse of electric collars ... could produce extreme states of anxiety in dogs. They

suggest that the use of such devices be restricted ...”to individuals with practical qualifications and suitable training in learning theory.” (Applied Animal Behavior Science 105 2007 pgs.369-380.)

The statement that somehow a remote shock collar can overcome “fear based behaviors” in minutes would be lauded as ludicrous by anyone in the science community. Steven R. Lindsay, MA discusses the causes and effects of fear based behaviors and devotes an entire chapter to the thorough analysis required in order to effectively help the dog learn how to cope with his fear. Lindsay states, “ Fear is a normal self-protective response to a potentially injurious stimulation. There are three broad ways in which adaptive fear is expressed: freeze, flight and fight.” (Etiology and Assessment of Behavior Problems: Handbook of Applied Dog Behavior and Training, pgs.69-91, Iowa State University Press 2001). Clearly, the freeze behavior is what can occur when the dog feels there is no other option.

It is interesting to note that often trainers with no education in scientific behavior modification make the claim that the dogs are happy, and the collar does not bother them at all. Interesting claim unless they have the equipment to measure cortisol levels and heart rate and can define what “happy” is to a dog. If, in fact, using the remote collar for training is so effective, then we should be able to remove completely the collar after the training is done and have the “trained behaviors” on cue as is normally done with regular training. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. Regardless of what training aids a person uses -- a clicker, or a choke collar or a gentle leader -- the MAIN idea is to have the behavior put on cue, such as a verbal command or hand signal without the need for the collar or any other tools.

Behavior training does take awhile if it did not we would have no need for Alcoholics Anonymous, Gamblers Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, or any cognitive behavioral specialists, we would just “tickle” the folks and they would comply immediately. We wouldn’t need to have smokers go through a process of behavioral modification we would just shock them and they would quit. The question is after we took their collars off, would they go back to smoking, but now hide behind the barn.

Anyone who has used a “tens” machine for back pain knows full well that there is a fine line where the electric impulse is not hurting and when it can be so intense it can make you jump off the table. If those people are only interested in making their dog a non-thinking, remote controlled robot, they might consider purchasing instead a video game rather than a thinking animal that does require time and energy and commitment.

As Dr. Overall states, if the 1/1000 of a second “ tap” (no information on how such data were acquired or validated) only generates a reaction so subtle that a dog might only look at you or flick his ear, why are we not using a clicker or a voice to get that response? Do we really need an electric collar to do that? If so, we have likely overridden many of the dogs normal responses.” (Journal of Veterinary Behavior, Vol. 2 # 4).

I would invite anyone who has trained their dog strictly with a remote collar to enter a real competition such as an AKC Obedience, or Agility trial where the dogs are asked to work together to demonstrate their true relationship. I have worked with owners whose dogs received prior shock collar training and now were collar aggressive, afraid to learn, and many other behaviors that can be attributed to incorrect training. Almost unequivocally the behaviors that the owners were seeking to have the dog learn could have easily been taught using other methods. There are many excellent reward based trainers that can be utilized; it is the owners responsibility to ask questions about the methods used and the educational background of the trainer. Unfortunately, there is NO licensing or criteria required by any governing body, anyone can call themselves an “animal trainer.”

Dr. Crowell-Davis, DVM, PhD, DACVB, a veterinary behaviorist at the University of Georgia, wrote an article in the July (2008) Journal of Veterinary Medicine discussing the use of electric collars. She speaks of the negative effects employed by these devices and states, “Despite the ethical issues surrounding the use of shock collars, such devices are still promoted and sold as harmless, and the APPEARANCE of authority is used to support such claims.” She further states, “veterinarians who recommend trainers and other animal care professionals need to exercise due diligence in being aware of exactly which techniques local animal care professionals use when interacting with animals.”

As Co-Chair of the Scientific Working Group on Dogs, a group comprised of national and international government and canine groups, including all detection disciplines, Dr. Overall speaks eloquently to the relationship of the canine human teams. She says: “The historic use of adversarial, coercive techniques no longer makes sense given what we now know about dog cognition and learning. We can do better. The canine handler teams that work the best are those that understand and trust each other. Anything that interferes with that trust and understanding is hurting the team.”