



# APDTNZ Position Statement

## Use of Electric Stimulation (Shock) Collars in Training

It is the Association of Pet Dog Trainers New Zealand's (APDTNZ) view that electronic training collars used in the pretext of training is not just unnecessary, but it a form of cruelty towards dogs. There are other highly effective, non-aversive training alternatives and shock collars should no longer be an accepted practice in dog training. There are decades of research indicating welfare concerns with the use of aversive tools such as shock collar that highlight the ethical implications of their use (Ziv, 2017).

Given the inherent welfare concerns over the use of shock in training, electric training collars are already banned in Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Austria, Switzerland, Slovenia, Germany and in some states in Australia (The Kennel Club, 2017). This is a non-exhaustive list and continues to expand. Nevertheless, shocking pet dogs remains a common training practice in many other countries, including New Zealand.

The British Veterinary Association, the European Society of Veterinary Clinical Ethology and the British Small Animal Veterinary Association, to name a few professional organisations, suggest that the use of electronic shock collars and other aversive methods for the training and containment of animals is harmful and "aversive stimuli received during training may not only be acutely stressful, painful and frightening for the animals, but may also produce long-term adverse effects on behavioural and emotional responses." (British Small Animal Veterinary Association, 2012).



As a professional pet dog training organisation, the APDTNZ and its members aim to help dog owners become aware that learning and behaviour modification can be consistently, reliably and effectively resolved (or at the very least successfully managed) with the use of humane, science-based, non-aversive training methods (China et al, 2020).



## Support from Scientific and Empirical Literature

Learning science and applied cognitive behavioural science is not new, though more and more studies are focusing their questions on the welfare and wellbeing of nonhuman animals under human care and control. There

are decades of peer-reviewed, scientific studies investigating behaviour and learning of many species, dogs and humans included, that explicitly outline that the use of electric shock as a form of corrective training is no more effective and carries physically and psychologically harmful effects.

Venerated behaviourist Dr. Karen Overall is an outspoken advocate for the use of non-aversive training. She states, “there are now terrific scientific and research data that show the harm that shock collars can do behaviourally” (Overall, 2007). In 2017, researcher Gal Ziv reviewed the existing research on the use of aversive methods in training, concluding that aversive methods such as shock collars are detrimental to the welfare of dogs and that dog trainers should avoid using shock collars in their training practices.

## Punishment

There can be no doubt that electric shock is a punisher. For punishment to be effective to training a dog there are three critical elements that must occur: consistency, timing and intensity. First, the punishment must occur every time the unwanted behaviour occurs. Second, it must be administered within one to two seconds of the behaviour occurring. Third, it must be unpleasant enough to stop the behaviour. Even when experienced trainers operate shock collars, there is a likelihood that the welfare of the dogs could be compromised. When an unskilled layperson uses a shock collar, it is likely that these welfare threats would be even greater. Due to the aversive nature of these devices and the likelihood of training ineffectiveness, their use can be considered abusive and are not advised.



## Consequences of Shock Collar Use

### *Lack of skill building*

Dogs experience primary emotions such as fear, anxiety, and happiness, at the very least. The use of punishment can cause anxious or fearful responses and may even increase aggressive behaviour in some dogs. Using positive reinforcement, dogs can effectively be taught the skills they need to cope with their environment and their existing undesired behaviours modified. According to learning and behaviour expert, Dr. Susan Friedman (2010), "punishment doesn't teach learners what to do instead of the problem behaviour. Punishment doesn't teach caregivers how to teach alternative behaviours. Punishment is really two aversive events – the onset of a punishing stimulus and the forfeiture of the reinforcer that has maintained the problem behaviour in the past."

### *Breakdown of the human-dog bond*

When it comes to relationship building between dogs and their humans, forcing compliance through the avoidance of shock or aversive consequence causes conflict and distrust. This can not only cause undue stress, but it also creates an unsafe environment where learning is inhibited. A dog who is repeatedly subjected to a shock may "shut down," which may be misconstrued as being "well behaved." In extreme cases, dogs may exhibit a complete lack of behaviour, or "learned helplessness." This is evidently counterproductive to training new, more acceptable replacement behaviours (O'Heare, 2011).





## *Stress and Pain*

Electronic shock collars present an unknown stimulus to pets which is, at best, neutral and, at worse, frightening and/or painful. This is the case at even the lowest setting because in many cases, the shock is completely unpredictable for the learner, who does not know when or why it is coming, adding to overall levels of fear and stress (Hiby et al, 2004; Lindsay, 2005).

Electronic stimulation regularly and repeatedly causes pain and stress, often exhibited by varying stress signals (Schilder & van der Borg, 2004). In extreme cases, electronic stimulation devices have also been known to cause muscle and tissue damage and respiratory and cardiac paralysis (Overall, 2013).

## *Learning: Generalisation, Associations with External Cues and Aggressive Behaviour*

For a dog to generalise a newly learned behaviour to all contexts and environments, the new behaviour must be reinforced and practiced so that the dog is able to transfer the new behaviour to any context or situation.

When using shock to train an animal, they must be repeatedly subjected to the shock (punisher) for the behaviour to become suppressed in varying



contexts and environments with an absence of learning desired actions. In other words, suppression means the learner has not learned an alternative desired behaviour. They are also likely to still experience a negative emotional state, such as fear or anxiety, leaving them more

susceptible to fallout. For example, a dog who is subjected to repeated aversion may become inadvertently conditioned to associate the fear and/or pain of the shock with certain contextual cues in their environment (example, the appearance of a dog predicts a shock.) Repeated instances of a shock and the external cue may create a negatively conditioned emotional response to the associated environmental cues. In such



instances, the dog may act or react aggressively toward the closest person or animal (redirected aggression), can become significantly frustrated and exhibit a lower bite threshold (O’Heare, 2007), and can suppress ritualised aggressive behaviours such as barking or growling leading directly to a bite without warning.

## Conclusion

The primary reason shock collars may result in stopping behaviour is because they are aversive. 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 (China et al, 2020; Ziv, 2017). There is enough pre-existing literature to conclude that using fear or physical punishment in the name of training is ineffective and potentially physically and psychologically harmful. Therefore, the APDTNZ does not support their use and furthermore, all full members of the APDTNZ must refrain from using electronic shock collars as a condition of their Ethical Code of Conduct.

## Footnote

(1) It is worth noting that this position statement is using “electronic stimulation or shock collars” as an umbrella for the many marketing terms that these products are often referred to as: e-collars, training collars, shock collars, e-touch, stimulation, tingle, TENS unit collar, remote trainers, and e-prods.

## References

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