

AGGRESSION BEGETS AGGRESSION

Punishment Can Increase Aggressive Behaviors

By Lisa Mullinax

The belief that [dominance](#) was a leading cause of aggression and other behavior problems formed in the 1940's, based on flawed observations of captive wolf packs.

This led to methods designed to "de-rank" dogs who misbehaved. The use of aversives equipment like shock collars, prong/pinch collars and physical methods such as the "alpha roll", scruff grabs and hanging dogs off the ground by their leash is, unfortunately, still being used by some dog trainers.

Today, top trainers and behaviorists know that punishment-based methods are ineffective in treating aggression because:

- Most aggressive behaviors are the result of fear or anxiety in the dog. As in any animal, fear and anxiety causes an increase in adrenaline and stress hormones. Punishing the dog can sabotage the training process by actually *increasing* adrenaline and stress levels, creating a dog that is overstimulated and beyond the ability to learn.
- Dogs learn by association. If a dog-reactive dog is routinely delivered an electrical shock or collar correction while looking at another dog, the dog will begin associating another dog with pain, thereby increasing the dog's level of anxiety and reactivity upon seeing another dog.

A recent study (Schalke 2005) showed that dogs that received shocks at random intervals (as an unskilled handler would use for problem behaviors) showed an average 327.78% increase in cortisol levels (the hormone used to measure stress) upon entering the room where they had received the shock *one month* earlier. For comparison, a previous study was referenced which reported an increase in cortisol of 250% in animals exposed to temperatures of -5 degrees celsius (23 degrees fahrenheit) for an hour.

- "Aggressive" behaviors such as growling, barking, or baring teeth are warnings the dog gives in an effort to avoid physical conflict. If a dog is punished for giving warnings, the dog will learn to suppress those warning behaviors and will, instead, go straight to attack mode (this is not to say that these behaviors should be ignored. If your dog is exhibiting these behaviors towards you, family members, visitors or other animals, you should contact a qualified behavior consultant).

Effective behavior modification involves four major components: management, desensitization, classical conditioning (changing the dog's emotions), and finally, teaching the dog new behaviors when presented with the offending stimulus (dogs, people, etc.), called counter-conditioning.