

Reprinted from the Journal of American Veterinary Medical Association.

February 15, 2008

## **Veterinary behavior society announces position on punishment**

In response to the popularity of television shows such as "The Dog Whisperer," the American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior has issued a position statement and guidelines on the use of punishment for dealing with behavior problems in animals.

The guidelines clarify that while punishment can be effective in specific contexts, it also has an association with many adverse effects.

"A major problem with using punishment is that it suppresses behavior temporarily but does not necessarily modify the underlying cause of the behavior," said Dr. John Ciribassi, AVSAB president.

Also, punishment may interfere with the human-animal bond. Owners tend to punish pets inconsistently and as a consequence of anger, so punishment may occur long after the bad behavior and may be intense. Dr. Ciribassi said, "We can have a problem with the pet not trusting the owner because it is unable to consistently anticipate what the owner is going to do in any given situation."

The pitfalls and possible adverse effects of punishment include the following:

- Timing punishment correctly is difficult
- Punishment can strengthen the undesirable behavior.
- The punishment must be strong enough to be effective, but intense punishment can lead to physical harm.
- Regardless of the strength, punishment can cause some animals to become extremely fearful, and this fear can generalize to other contexts.
- Punishment can facilitate or even cause aggressive behavior.
- Punishment can suppress behaviors, including those behaviors that warn of aggression.
- Punishment can teach the animal to associate the owners, other animals, specific contexts, or environments with bad experiences.
- Punishment often does not address the underlying cause of behaviors or teach alternate behaviors.

The AVSAB's position is that punishment is not appropriate as a first-line or early-use treatment for behavior problems. Modification should focus on reinforcing desirable behaviors, removing reinforcement for inappropriate behaviors, and addressing the emotional state and environmental conditions driving undesirable behavior.

The AVSAB position statement and guidelines are available at [www.avsabonline.org](http://www.avsabonline.org)