

Dog Training Methods
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How to correctly use food rewards in training is part of the broader issue of deciding what methods to use to train dogs or to change problem behavior. Choke chains, snap chokes, and to a lesser degree pinch collars, are widely used training devices based on the principle of negative reinforcement. Negative reinforcement can teach new behavior because by behaving correctly, the dog can escape or avoid the choking or pinching action of the collar.

For example, to teach a dog to sit with this method, the leash is jerked upwards when the command is given, causing the collar to become uncomfortable. When the dog sits, the leash is loosened and sitting is negatively reinforced because by doing so the dog “turned off” the pressure on his neck.

Choke chains are also often used to attempt to punish a variety of undesirable behaviors. We recently had a call from someone who wanted to know how to use a choke chain to get her dog to stop snapping at people. With this approach, when the dog snaps, the leash is jerked and the collar tightens as punishment for snapping.

The timing, intensity and duration of any negative stimuli like these are crucial to their effectiveness and appropriateness. When aversive training procedures are too intense, go on for too long or are not closely connected with the problem behavior they can turn into abusive and cruel treatment.

Using punishment to the point that a dog urinates or defecates, using choke chains to lift dogs off their feet or hang them or continuing to give repeated collar corrections for minutes after the misbehavior has occurred are not appropriate training procedures but abusive treatment.

It is difficult to abuse a dog using positive reinforcement. At worst, using positive reinforcement incorrectly can teach undesirable behavior; using aversive methods incorrectly can result in cruel treatment, physical injury, and produce a dog who is fearful and aggressive.

Our advice to pet owners when choosing a training method: 1) if a particular procedure is unacceptable to you - don't allow yourself to be forced into using it, 2) if you witness what you believe to be cruel training procedures, report it to a state certified cruelty investigator and be sure to obtain names of other witnesses, 3) before you give anyone permission to work with your dog, be sure you know what methods will be used and don't be afraid to tell them to stop if you are concerned for your dog's well-being and 4) if you want to use positive reinforcement methods in training your dog, seek out people who use them.