

Products to manage undesirable behavior

There are a wide variety of products that can be useful in correcting or managing undesirable behavior in pets. Devices that are activated by the owner can be used to interrupt a behavior so that the desirable response can be achieved or may serve as a punisher so that the pet is less likely to repeat the act in the future. However, behavior is likely to continue in the owner's absence, especially if it is rewarding (e.g., garbage raiding), comforting (e.g., sleeping on the couch) or brings relief (e.g., elimination) since there are no unpleasant consequences associated with the behavior when the owner is not watching. Therefore remote punishment or avoidance devices (booby traps) might be more effective, so that the pet associates the punishment with the act, and not with the owner. Since pain, discomfort, and excessive fear compromise the pet's welfare, the minimum level of intensity required to achieve the desired outcome should be used and they should immediately be stopped if they cause excessive fear. However, before any of these devices are considered as a means of deterring undesirable behavior, you must first focus on: (1) how to train and reinforce alternative desirable behaviors; (2) how to cease rewarding undesirable behaviors; and (3) how to prevent rather than punish. Since positive punishment causes a decrease in behavior by making the pet fearful of repeating the behavior, punishment should not be used to "correct" behaviors that are motivated by fear or anxiety. In addition, if any of these products or techniques: (1) are ineffective in interrupting or stopping the undesirable behavior after the first or second attempt; (2) cause undue fear or anxiety; or (3) lead to threats or aggression, they should be immediately discontinued.

Disruptive stimuli

The goal of a disruptive stimulus is to interrupt the undesirable response. This allows an opportunity for the performance of a desirable response which can then be reinforced.

Remote punishment

This can be used to deter undesirable behavior without causing fear of, or association with, the owner. For example, punishment can be administered from a distance by using a remote-activated spray collar (lemon, citronella, or air). Timing must be immediate and the punishment should be withdrawn as soon as the behavior ceases. Garbage raiding, urine marking, jumping on counters, and coprophagia are examples of problems that might be corrected with a remote-activated device.

Pet-activated devices – avoidance

Environmental punishment or booby traps can be used to deter undesirable behavior or entry into restricted areas even in the owner's absence. The goal is for the pet to learn that the area or the behavior itself is associated with unpleasant consequences. Motion-activated alarms or sprays or unpleasant surfaces such as sticky tape or upside-down carpet runners are often used for this purpose.

Disruptors and punishment devices

Owner-activated devices

1. Direct devices can be used to interrupt undesirable behaviors (e.g., a pet jumping up) so that desirable behaviors can be reinforced or as a means of reducing repetition of behaviors that might be damaging to the house or unsafe for the pet (e.g., garbage raiding, stealing). Some of the commercial devices available include audible, ultrasonic, or spray deterrents. You can also use a "shake" can full of pennies, pocket rape alarm, or air horn as audible deterrents or a water gun or can of compressed air.
2. Remote devices provide a way to stop an undesirable behavior while the owner remains out of sight so that the behavior is discouraged without any association with or fear of the owner. These include remote-controlled citronella or scentless spray collars, and a remote-control vibrating collar that might be used as a positive signal to train deaf dogs. Something thrown on the floor near the pet (e.g., shake can or bean bag) may also serve to interrupt the behavior. Other products include long-range water rifles and remote-controlled switches that can be used to activate an alarm, hair dryer, water sprayer, or tape recording. By placing these devices in the area where the pet might misbehave (e.g., plant, garbage) and activating them with a remote switch, the pet might learn to avoid the area. To administer remote punishment at the right time, the owner will need to monitor from a distance while remaining out of sight; a web cam or pet monitor might be useful.

Pet-activated devices

1. Outdoor devices. Electronic containment systems can be used to keep dogs within selected boundaries, or away from selected areas. A transmitter wire is buried along the boundary, and a radio transmitter sends a signal that is received by the collar. As the pet approaches, there is first a warning tone, and then activation of a spray collar if the pet does not retreat out of range. Motion-activated alarms and sprays, ultrasonic deterrents, a motion-activated water sprinkler, and pet repellents can keep pets out of selected areas on the property (e.g., gardens) or stray animals off the property.
2. Indoor devices. Devices designed to keep pets away from areas (i.e., avoidance) include indoor electronic containment systems that activate a spray collar as the pet approaches as well as motion-activated sprays and alarms. Alarms and detectors designed for home security may also be effective. You might also find that a pet may avoid an area if you place down less appealing substrates (e.g., aluminum foil, plastic, or rubber mats) or uncomfortable substrates (e.g., upside-down vinyl carpet runners, double-sided tape) or spray the area with a pet repellent or chew deterrents such as hot sauces, menthol, oil of eucalyptus, cayenne pepper, or commercially available antichew sprays. Some pets, especially cats, may avoid areas with strong perfumes or citrus odors.
3. Dog and cat doors have been developed that will only open for the pet wearing the activation collar or "key." In fact, some can be programmed to be activated by the pet's microchip. Child safety locks, secure trash bins, barricades, and crates or dog pens can be used to prevent and avoid problems.
4. Bark deterrents: for a bark-activated device to be effective, it must immediately interrupt the barking, be sensitive enough to detect each undesirable vocalization, and specific enough that it is not activated by extraneous stimuli. Bark-activated, audible, and ultrasonic devices can be placed in areas where the pet might bark (window, front hall, cage). Bark-activated collars that deliver a spray of air or citronella can be worn by the dog at times it might bark. There are also ultrasonic and audible deterrent bark collars but these seldom appear to be effective. Bark-activated products should only be applied if they effectively stop the barking and the owner is present to reward the quiet behaviors that precede and follow barking. Vocalization that is due to anxiety (e.g., storm phobia, separation anxiety) should not be suppressed by a bark collar since, even if effective at reducing barking, it will likely increase, not decrease, the pet's anxiety.