

PRODUCTS FOR MANAGING AND CORRECTING UNDESIRABLE BEHAVIOR

Note that products are mentioned by name because of author familiarity, and not because they are necessarily superior to other products.

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 disrupt a behavior so that the desirable response can be achieved or may serve to punish the undesirable behavior so that the pet is less likely to repeat the act in the future. However, devices that are activated by the owner may only allow the owner to manage the problem behavior when the owner is present, since the pet will learn that there are no unpleasant consequences for the behavior when the owner is absent. In fact, if the behavior is enjoyable (e.g., garbage raiding, sleeping on a couch) or provides relief from discomfort (e.g., housesoiling, chewing) then the pet will be highly likely to repeat the behavior in the owner's absence. Therefore remote forms of punishment or environmental punishment ('booby traps') may be more effective.

DISRUPTIVE STIMULI (EXTERNAL INHIBITION)

The goal of the disruptive stimulus is to inhibit the undesirable response and achieve a desirable response, which can then be reinforced (negatively and/or positively). If the disruption is preceded by a command, and then the desirable response is achieved, these devices can be a useful training aid. If the device, on the other hand, causes fear, anxiety, or discomfort, it might meet the definition of a punisher since it should decrease the likelihood that the pet will repeat the behavior (at least when the owner is present).

Remote punishment

Remote punishment can be used to deter undesirable behavior without causing fear of, or association with, the owner. Punishment can be administered remotely with any of the direct intervention devices or with any device activated by a remote switch. Garbage raiding and jumping onto counters are problems that might be corrected with a properly and consistently applied remote device. As soon as the inappropriate action begins it can be stopped, disrupted, or deterred with one of these products. Using negative reinforcement principles, the owners should also be taught to withdraw the punishment/discomfort as soon as the undesirable action ceases. Desirable responses can then be rewarded.

Environmental punishment and 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 effect is for the pet to learn that the area or the behavior itself is associated with unpleasant consequences. This type of punishment resembles the learning that occurs when pets are exposed to unpleasant or fearful aspects of their environment such as cars, predators, porcupines, toxic plants, barbed wire, sprinklers, etc.

Shock and discomfort

Most pets quickly learn to avoid situations or locations that lead to fear or discomfort. Similarly, some training devices use varying levels of discomfort or shock, such as electronic avoidance devices (e.g., Invisible Fencing[®], Scat Mat[®]), and bark-activated shock collars. These devices are considered inhumane and are therefore illegal in certain countries, but are still widely available in North America. In principle, pet owners should be able to find successful alternative training methods and products to correct or manage most behavior problems. However, when all other practical solutions have been exhausted, these products offer another alternative that may quickly and effectively resolve the problem, but could also be unsuccessful or lead to excessive fear and discomfort. Therefore when the problem is sufficiently severe (i.e., euthanasia or rehoming may otherwise be considered), the pet's safety is at risk, and there is a product that will successfully resolve the problem with a minimum of discomfort, the potential benefits will need to be weighed against the risks and potential harm to the pet.

Disruption and punishment devices

Owner-activated devices

- a) Direct devices include commercial devices such as audible trainers (Barker Breaker™, Sonic Pet Trainer™), ultrasonic trainers (Pet-Agree™, Easy Trainer™, Ultrasonic Pet Trainer™), or a citronella spray (Direct Stop™). Other devices that might be homemade or modified from other applications include a can of pennies (shake can), pocket rape alarms, air horns, a water rifle, or a can of compressed air.
- b) Remote devices: commercially available products include remote-controlled citronella (Master Plus™, Spray Commander™) and shock collars and a remote-control vibrating collar (PetPager™, for training deaf dogs). Homemade 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 should quickly learn to avoid the area.

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 the collar (e.g., citronella spray or shock) if the pet does not retreat out of range. Motion-activated alarms (Critter Gitter™), ultrasonic deterrents (The ScareCrow™ – a motion detector sprinkler), and pet repellents might also help to keep the owner's pet out of selected areas on the property (e.g., gardens) or stray animals off the property.
2. Indoor devices. Commercial devices designed to keep pets away from areas (or confined to specific areas) include indoor electronic containment systems that use citronella (Spray Barrier™) or shock collars that are activated by a transmission dish. The Scraminal™ is a motion detector alarm, and there are mats that set off an alarm (SofaSaver™, Scratcher Blaster™) or give mild static-type shocks (e.g., Scat Mat™, Pet Mat™) that can deter entry into areas or onto furniture and windowsills. The Snappy Trainer™ has a plastic flap that fits over the end of a mousetrap, which serves as a safer approach to using mousetraps as booby traps. A spray device that is activated by the approach of a pet (Ssscatter™) is a useful product for keeping dogs and cats away from selected areas (e.g., garbage, counters). Commercial chew deterrents (e.g., Ropel™) and pet repellents are also available. Motion detectors designed for home security use may also be effective. Homemade or modified deterrents might include less appealing substrates (e.g., aluminum foil, plastic, or rubber mats), uncomfortable substrates (e.g., upside down vinyl carpet runners, double-sided tape), or bitter or 'hot' tasting sprays (menthol, oil of eucalyptus, cayenne pepper mixed with water). With a little innovation and forethought owners can set up a stack of empty cans, a bucket of water perched to fall when disturbed, or balloons set to pop on contact when the pet enters the area.
3. A number of dog and cat doors have been designed to be activated only by the pet wearing the activation collar or 'key'. These products allow only one selected pet to access areas that require entry through the pet door.
4. Bark deterrents: for a bark-activated device to be effective, it must immediately interrupt the barking, must be sensitive enough to detect each undesirable vocalization (whine, bark), and specific enough that it is not activated by extraneous stimuli. The Super Barker Breaker™ and K-9 Bark Stopper™ are audible bark-activated alarms that are designed to be placed on a counter or table in an area where a dog might bark (front hall, cage, etc.). Bark-activated collars emit an audible or ultrasonic noise or a spray of citronella with each bark. The audible and ultrasonic devices are seldom sensitive, specific, or noxious enough to be effective. The most effective antibark collars have proven to be the Gentle Spray™ or Aboistop™ collar, which emits a spray of citronella with each bark. A bark-activated scentless spray is also now available, which may be equally effective for some, but not all dogs.