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Behavior Education for Pet Parents and Pet Professionals

Animal Behavior Associates Newsletter

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Dear Suzanne,

Happy Valentine's Day! After you've eaten the chocolates, admired your flowers, and enjoyed a romantic dinner, end your day with a relaxing read of our newsletter.

Best wishes,
Suzanne and Dan

• **Cat Piece:** **Cautious Cats**

Unbelievably, our cat Buffett is now 14 years old. He looks and acts much younger than other cats we've had when they've reached this age. However, he is becoming quite stiff in his back legs and having more and more difficulty jumping up onto a bar chair and from there onto the counter where his food and water are located. We often lift him up, but we decided recently he needed a pet-stair to make things easier.



Dog Piece: **Shocking News!**

This week I did an interview with a local television station on the subject of electronic collars. As with most any media interview, the reporter wanted succinct information – sound bytes –



We placed the stair in front of the chair and placed Buffett on the stair. He climbed right up without any problems. Later in the day though, we observed him ignoring the stairs and trying to jump up on the chair as he

that would be easily understandable by viewers. While many people have strong opinions about the use of "shock collars", in reality the term encompasses a variety of sophisticated products, the proper and improper use of which is difficult to explain in 25 words or less.

During the interview, I wanted to broaden the scope of the subject a bit to point out that there are bigger issues in question than just the use of electronic collars. The first is that most pet owners still focus on how they can get pets to stop displaying unwanted behaviors. The more productive perspective is to consider how they can elicit and reward behaviors they like.

Second, is the cavalier attitude people have about using a variety of punishment based tools and methods including choke chains, pinch collars, "alpha rolls" and throw chains. Most folks are unaware of the careful, precise, and most importantly sparing way any type of punishment should be used. Instead, too many are willing to accept that punishment and force and "showing the dog who's boss" are unavoidable requirements for having a well behaved pet.

When it comes to remote training collars, these are powerful tools that are too often misused because far too few people understand how to use them effectively and humanely. In general the worst way to use a remote collar is as a punishment device. Many pet owners are still using them out of anger or frustration which significantly increases the potential for abuse.

The results of a study done in Germany in 2006 (Schalke, et al, Applied Animal Behavior Science, in press) revealed that dogs that were subjected to high intensity electrical stimulation delivered with poor timing (meaning inconsistently with regard to the dog's behavior) resulted in a "high risk that dogs will show severe and

always has.

This observation reminded us that pets develop habits, or patterns of behavior, that aren't always easy to change. Even though the stair made access to the counter easier for Buffett, this didn't ensure he would use it.

Although it's common for many animals, cats seem to be quite cautious about anything new. It's understandable that neophobia (fear of the unfamiliar) could be quite adaptive – in the wild, what you don't know can harm or kill you.

To help Buffett make using the stairs a habit, we could continue to place him on the stairs every time we saw him trying to get on the counter. We could also make not using the stairs more difficult by covering his normal "take-off" spot for jumping on the counter with pointy-side up carpet runners. A combination of both techniques might work well.

Whenever you introduce anything new into your cat's environment, whether it be a toy, litterbox, scratching post or bed, don't be surprised if it takes your cat awhile to accept and use it. One reason cats likely urine-mark (spray) new household items is to leave their odor so that unfamiliar objects become familiar through the use of scent.

Some well socialized cats are just naturally curious and will immediately investigate anything new in their world. While there has been no definitive research on the subject, some behavior experts believe that the more timid and anxious a cat is, the more likely he is to urine-mark in order to increase his sense (or scents!) of familiarity regarding his surroundings. This is the opposite of popular belief that holds cats higher in the social hierarchy are more likely to urine-mark, although there is no data to support this.

- **Our Piece:**
A Lesson in Learning



In an attempt to minimize pestering, attention getting behaviors, people will

persistent stress symptoms." The authors of this paper point out how important it is that anyone using them have both "theoretical and practical qualification(s)" and that the collars are best used only in "strictly specified situations."

Features of some of these collars – such as a vibration only, and a beep that can be used as conditioned positive reinforcement - are unfortunately under-utilized.

Electronic collars which are triggered by the dog’s behavior – such as the boundary systems and bark collars – at least meet two important criteria for effective punishment. They deliver punishment immediately and consistently. However, as with any positive punisher, careful assessment is required to determine whether these products are appropriate for an individual dog and a specific situation.

Before using any device or technique that has the potential to cause harm, and result in either fear or aggression, both pet parents and pet professionals should have a detailed, rational plan, incorporate a rich program of positive reinforcement, and consider what could go wrong. [Delta Society's Guidelines for Humane and Effective Dog Training](#) include a wonderful flow chart to assist in decision making.

February Special

**Slide CDs over 35% off
Only \$9.95 each**

- [Understanding Canine Conflicts](#)
- [Understanding Dogs That Eat Poop](#)
- [What Cats Want](#)
- [Helping Cats Co- Exist](#)

We have recently discovered compability issues

often yell at their pets or threaten punishment. In his younger years, our cat Buffett would sometimes push items off the counter, knowing that he could make us jump up and yell at him. When we did so, Buffett would of course immediately jump off the counter and run down the hallway. Rather than our response punishing Buffett's behavior, we were likely rewarding it, as Buffett found the entire sequence to be quite a fun game.

We’ve heard people describe our behavior as “negatively reinforcing” Buffett’s attention getting destructiveness. The purported interpretation was that we were rewarding a “negative” or unwanted behavior. This is NOT what negative reinforcement is.

Negative reinforcement occurs when an animal’s behavior results in something unpleasant being taking away. For example, cats may swat or dogs may growl to stop someone from touching them. For these pets, being touched is unpleasant. By threatening people, they can stop this unpleasant touching from happening. So growling and swatting are negatively reinforced because they prevent something unpleasant (being touched) from happening.

Negative reinforcement has also been called escape and avoidance training. The initial stage of negative reinforcement training involves escape. If you pet a cat and he swats at you, you’ll likely stop petting him to avoid being scratched. The cat has just learned swatting can allow him to escape petting. The next time you reach to pet the cat, he may swat before you touch him. The cat has learned to swat to avoid being petted.

Our Dog Piece this month talked about electronic collars. If remote training collars are to be used, their use will be more appropriate when based on negative reinforcement rather than punishment. With this method, the dog knows precisely what behavior to perform to either escape or avoid the stimulation. This "correct" behavior is taught using positive reinforcement, before the remote collar is ever introduced to the dog. The collar is then used to negatively reinforce this behavior.

Unfortunately, most people put these collars

exist with our slide CDs and the newly released Internet Explorer 7 web browser, that prevents the CD from playing. The CD still works with earlier versions of Internet Explorer, as well as other browsers such as [Mozilla's FireFox, which is a free download](#). To offset the inconvenience of this extra step, we are offering our narrated slide presentation CDs at a great price! US ground shipping is included!

on dogs with the intent of shocking them when they misbehave. The dog has no understanding ahead of time what he needs to do to either escape or avoid the shock. This type of use is most likely to elicit the stress referred to in the German study, as well as fear and aggressive responses.

Any technique that you use to change a pet's behavior will be more effective if you have a carefully thought out plan and a clear understanding of how what you do will likely effect your pet's behavior.

• **What's New:** **Blogs and Telecourses**

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For our Colorado subscribers, take note that on March 10th and 11th, we'll be at the Colorado Family Pet Expo at the Convention



Center downtown. Stop by and see us, mention our ezine and we'll give you a surprise gift!

We'll soon be launching our new multi-media blog, so look for more information from us in the next several months. Also our new audio hardware arrived to allow us to record our telecourses in higher quality audio, so we'll be scheduling courses and dates very soon. If you have suggestions for courses, let us know on our [Most Burning Question page](#)

The end of this month we travel to New Orleans to our annual invitation-only Interdisciplinary Forum in Applied Animal Behavior. We'll be gathering with friends and colleagues to 'talk shop' for a lively, challenging and fun 3 days.

Since our January issue, Dan has returned from his court case in Wisconsin, and Suzanne is back from her internet "boot camp" in Atlanta and a quick trip to Portland Oregon to participate in a National Animal Control

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Association's Level I Training Academy. And last but not least, the steel pan drum group that Suzanne plays in performed at an ethnic diversity event at a local high school.