

E-collars early use and conditioning.

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This article is intended to help new and experienced dog owners alike understand the proper use of the electronic training collar more commonly known as the shock collar.

The name shock or shocking collar is an unfortunate name for this device as it tends to have a very negative connotation from the onset. Although electricity does activate the stimulation which the dog feels it does not deliver an electric shock to the dog.

The e-collar does however deliver a series of impulses which vary in levels of intensity. This stimulation is delivered in a series of "pricking" sensations which can be increased or decreased by the trainer. The higher the frequency, the faster the pulse or "pricks" are delivered creating a higher level of stimulus. It is basically like allowing a car to idle (low intensity) or revving the engine (higher intensity).

It is very common in the dog world to hear people voice very strong objections to the use of the "shock collar" and almost everyone has a story about how a dog was ruined by their use. It is true, many a decent dog has been miss handled by the human running the controls of an e-collar. The training collar itself will not ruin a dog if used properly. For every person who bemoans the use of an e-collar there are many knowledgeable and experienced dog owners and trainers amateur and professionals alike who have learned to rely heavily on their use. This article is intended to dispel some of the myth and fear surrounding the use of the e-collar and hopefully help the reader gain an understanding of the proper way to introduce and train a dog with one.

Before we start into the proper use of the collar itself it will be necessary to have a basic understanding of how a dog learns. Dogs are for the most part a very easy and simple animal to train. They have an uncanny ability to behave in such a way that benefits them. This is a trait which has insured their survival and has allowed our four legged friends to weave themselves into our lives. Dogs learn from association. This can come from negative reinforcement and positive reinforcement. In order for a dog to be trained in the true sense of the word they need to be exposed to both in order for them to make the appropriate association and then learn to exhibit the correct behavior in order to avoid the negative reinforcement and receive the positive reinforcement. I call it profit and loss. Dogs can do the math exceptionally fast and will always, if given the proper chance, choose the positive reinforcement path. Most animal behaviorists agree that a dog makes an association in less than a second's time and can retain the lesson learned from that seemingly instantaneous association for their entire lives. Knowing this gives us as trainers the advantage.

The use of the electronic training collar has enabled us to deliver an immediate correction which falls well within that less than one second window in which a dog can make an association or "learn".

So, where do we start? How do we utilize this tool so that we can maximize our training and success? The answer is in how we introduce the dog to the collar and how we teach the dog to "turn it off".

The first thing is to introduce the dog to the collar. Most collar manufacturers should recommend that the dog be allowed to wear the collar for several outings before it is even turned on. The dog needs to get used to it being on while experiencing positive activities. This is helping the dog to associate the collar with positive activity and if given this chance the dog will accept the collar as a good thing. Note. DO NOT leave the collar on the dog's neck for more than 6 to 8 hours at a time. They DO rub sores on the neck and can be harmful. They are intended to be worn on outings or training sessions and then be taken off.

The collar needs to be snug and worn as close to the lower jaw as possible or where the jaw meets the throat area. The prongs need to be long enough to make contact with the skin and it usually takes a little time with the dog wearing it for the prongs to work through the hair and make contact with the skin.

After the initial introduction to the collar is completed it is time to learn the dog's sensitivity level. Some dogs respond to the lowest possible level of stimulation and others need a higher level. All dogs are different in this area. Put the activated collar on the dog and either have him/her in a confined area or on a leash and starting at the lowest setting push the button. You are looking for the slightest reaction. This is usually a twitching of the ears or a sideways turn of the head or perhaps a startled expression. You are not looking for a pain response. Slowly go up through the levels until you see these signals in the dog's body language. When you find this level you have found the level of intensity that this particular dog can learn with.

Now it's time to train. It is time to allow the dog to learn that it can turn the uncomfortable twitching sensation off. This is accomplished most easily by teaching the dog to come. Most dogs if properly bonded with you will come to you if startled or confused. With the button being pushed and the dog receiving a "negative" stimulation, call him to you. The very instant the dog starts to come your way let off of the button. If the dog stops and turns away from you push the button and repeat the command. If the dog turns towards you turn it off. Most, if not all of the dogs I have started this way learn very quickly that by coming towards me they have turned off the "prickling" sensation. The dog is then petted and praised for coming. This is how you introduce the negative and positive reinforcement for the dog to learn from. The real secret here is you are allowing the dog to figure it out and choose the positive path. You are accomplishing two major training objectives together. One, you are teaching the dog to come when called but probably more importantly, you are teaching the dog how to turn off the negative reinforcement or in other words how to turn off the e-collar.

This is a very relaxed and essentially non threatening way for a dog to learn. If we were to crank the collar on a high level which causes the dog to scream in pain the dog simply cannot learn. Dogs DO NOT learn well when in pain. If given the chance to choose they will choose the positive and learn how to avoid the negative and this lesson will last for the life of the dog.

Once the dog has "learned" how to turn the collar off you can introduce other disciplines in the training regimen such as sit, stay, heel, off etc. Keep in mind that you are taking the dog through its basic obedience but again more importantly you

are conditioning the dog to comply with the collars negative stimulation. If properly introduced to the collar in the first place very few if any dogs will associate the collar itself with the prickling sensation and will not become what is commonly referred to as becoming collar wise.

The e-collar should be put on the dog who is in training EVERY time the dog is allowed out of the kennel and commands are going to be given. Remember these are training collars and the dog is in training. If the dog is allowed to sometimes wear the collar and other times commands are given without the collar some dogs will become collar wise and only mind when the collar is on. This is not good and can cause us to OVER correct when we should not have to if we would have put the collar on every time out. Well trained and finished dogs do not need the collar, but they are trained dogs and we are talking about dogs who are in training.

It is my hope that by taking a little extra time in doing your yard work and obedience training you can establish a relationship and environment for your dog to be successful in its training. The proper early use of an e-collar that will pave the way for more advanced training in the future through the use of the electronic training collar. I hope to continue with this article through the advanced stages of training.