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Basic E-Collar Training for the Police K-9

By Jerry Bradshaw • The behavioral basis for off-leash training, just like on-leash training, lies in conditioning. A dog's response to commands off-leash must become a habit. Typically there are two approaches to off-leash training. The first is the long-line method. Once the behaviors you want are conditioned with the dog on a short leash, switch to a long line, and let the dog drag the line. The line is still there for the handler to grab and to enforce commands. The problem is the leash can be a little cumbersome to manage, and delays in enforcing a command can present a timing issue that interferes with learning.

The second approach is to condition the off-leash behaviors using an electronic training collar (e-collar). The e-collar is gaining widespread acceptance in police dog training circles and has been a staple of high-level competitive working dog training for years with excellent results.

The overriding benefit of the e-collar is it allows the trainer to teach unacceptable behaviors have consequences regardless of how close or far the dog is in relation to you. It allows for consistent levels of correction in a wide range of contexts. Dogs trained to off-leash control with the e-collar have more freedom and still remain under control should some competing motivation or distraction arise. Another benefit of the e-collar is one can administer the aversive without becoming physical with the dog. By necessity, a leash correction requires the trainer to make hand and arm movements which can cue behavior. We often refer to a handler-aggressive dog as one who "comes up the leash," usually in reaction to this very cue. The e-collar allows for the unemotional delivery of corrections. This benefits handlers with dominant dogs as well as dogs with softer temperaments because it lessens The association between the handler and dog with the aversive stimulus. Many people mistakenly think dogs with soft temperaments are poor candidates for e-collar training, but just the opposite is true. Dogs sensitive to the handler can be corrected on very low levels of stimulation, and since the handler is not physically delivering the correction, the dog does not respond with submissive behaviors.

In what follows, we will outline a method for integrating the e-collar into your training with minimal change in how you already work your dog. Obviously this is just one method; however, having been a user of this device for both training high-level competition dogs and police dogs, I believe it is a well-tested method that gets results, but most importantly, it has little in the way of side effects on other trained behaviors requiring independence, such as searching, tracking and detection.

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Electrical Engineering 101 • An e-collar is comprised of a collar receiver around the neck of the dog and a transmitter held in the trainer's hand. In "nick" mode, the transmitter delivers a pre-timed burst of stimulation on the order of a fraction of a second. In continuous mode, the collar delivers a continuous string of these pre-timed bursts as long as the button is held down. The collar usually has a fail-safe allowing only 10 seconds maximum stimulation.
The stimulation delivered is a very low amperage electrical charge, which stimulates the nerve endings in the neck. Because electricity seeks the fastest route when completing the circuit, the stimulation travels from the sending probe across the skin of the neck (the distance between the probes) to the receiving probe. It doesn't go through the body of the dog. If you put the collar on your skin and press the button (I recommend you do this so you have a sense of the stimulation), it feels like a static electricity shock you might get from wearing wool socks on a carpet and then touching a doorknob. We have all done this and felt startled. However, we know it is impossible for it to hurt us. The feature of getting a staticelectric shock is that one usually doesn't want to repeat it. This is the essential feature of low amperage stimulation that is useful in training a dog – the dog learns to do what we want to avoid the unpleasant sensation, i.e., he learns to avoid behaviors that bring the aversive stimulus.

The manufacturers sell most modern electronic training collars as standalone training systems. Their instructions include procedures for employing the collar as a teaching tool for establishing new associations between command words and behaviors. This is done through using he behavioral consequence known as negative reinforcement. Reinforcement is any consequence that increases the likelihood of a behavior. Negative reinforce tment requires removing an unpleasant consequence to increase the likelihood of a behavior. To do this with an e-collar, one puts the collar on a low setting and holding down the continuous mode button or repeatedly tapping the nick button.
The trainer then guides the dog into the behavior, and when the dog places his rear on the ground, the trainer stops the aversive, thus removing the unpleasant stimulation. The dog learns the consequence: Sitting removes the unpleasant feeling, thus increasing the likelihood of the sitting behavior in the future.

There are some side effects to this approach. To remove the unpleasant feeling when the dog achieves the itended behavior, we must first induce the upleasant feeling on the dog when he is doing-nothing inappropriate. This provides an association: New learning means upleasant stimulation. Depending on the temperament of the dog, this can have no impact whatsoever or it can have a dramatic impact on the dog's behavior and desire to learn. Some of the trainers understand why he is being stimulated. This can result in the dog being afraid to do anything that might bring on more unpleasant feeling.

All learning is stressful to a dog, but by a matter of degrees. The goal of negative reinforcement training is to have the dog realize he can avoid the unpleasant feeling by performing a very specific behavior, e.g. to sit. When considering this particular behavior out of the myriad choices of behaviors, one can imagine the dog will go through a number of behaviors that don't work, since he hasn't been taught which behavior will actually work. Some trainers call this "exploring behaviors." I see it as a hole in the method. I think we should first teach the dog a set of behaviors likely to come into play. In fact my method is this: Train these behaviors motivationally, and then use the collar as a form of positive punishment, just like we do with leash corrections.

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Positive punishment means we apply an unpleasant consequence (e-collar stimulation) to reduce the likelihood of a given behavior. In this sense, we will positively punish all unwanted behaviors and positively reinforce all trained behaviors. The e-collar then becomes a tool for what we normally refer to as correction, rather than for teaching. This avoids the majority of the stress of the old method of negative reinforcement training, and results in negative associations only with unwanted behaviors, and positive associations with all trained behaviors.

There may be times when negative reinforcement is a valuable approach to teach a particular behavior in a particular way. Even so, I still believe teaching the dog the route to escape the negative consequence will make the training proceed less stressfully, consequently making it is easier for the dog to choose an avoidance strategy that will work and end the stimulation. Dogs solve simple problems much more easily than complex ones with many variables to consider. So, whether you are teaching new concepts by positive reinforcement or negative reinforcement, there is ample reason to attempt to lay a motivational foundation to the behaviors you will require the dog to perform. The next issue is how to add the e-collar to the training so it is very clear for the dog and minimizes stress and maximizes performance.

PHOTO BY KATRINA S. KARDIASMENOS, PH.D.

As shown here with this dog that is doing a bark and hold, an e-collar is helpful in maintaining control and keeping the dog from taking a bite until commanded.

The Concept of Pairing Corrections • E-collar companies, and some of the e-collar trainers now teaching seminars on its use, often begin their introduction to using the e-collar by saying right from the beginning we can teach your dog without ever using a leash and standard on-leash training is out of date with the new e-collar technology.

PHOTO BY KATRINA S. KARDIASMENOS, PH.D.

E-collars allow you to achieve higher degrees of control under all conditions and distractions.

I disagree. It is much easier to introduce positive punishment in the form of a leash correction. Leashes attached to training collars have two components when delivering a correction: force and direction. A leash tugged gently in the upward direction, after a dog is taught motivationally to sit, is a very easy way to deal with non-compliance to a learned behavior. The leash provides a reason not to ignore the command to sit, while providing guidance on how to correct the inappropriate response. Each command has an associated leash correction, on which we can vary the force, and provide feedback to the dog on what exactly was required by the command.

These guiding corrections have very little force but apply guidance to the dog about what he did wrong and how to correct himself in the future. He learns therefore what each of the leash corrections mean before they become a truly aversive stimulus. Once this is complete, we morph the guiding corrections into standard leash corrections when commands are not properly executed. This involves simply increasing the level of the force until it is enough to positively punish the unwanted behavior.

Once the dog understands the meaning of leash corrections, we can introduce the e-collar as a new correction. To do this we employ simple classical conditioning to teach the dog, in a given context, that the e-collar stimulation means the

same thing as the leash correction with which he is already familiar. The problem is e-collars employ only force and not direction. The stimulation comes from the same direction all the time. Some trainers will move the collar receiver around the dog, up on the top of the neck for the down correction, under for the sit correction, etc. I don't do this as I believe it makes the dog wise to the placement of the collar, and is negates the very essence of the e-collar which is efficiency.

The correction we wish to condition, that of the e-collar, is placed in time closely prior to the existing leash correction for heeling. For example, the leash correction for heeling is a 180-degree turn with a jerk-and-release correction on the training collar. We are assuming the dog has had some initial introduction to heeling with a toy reward and some light guiding corrections to teach the dog where heel position is. Then when the dog shows an undesirable behavior (forges) the trainer makes a 180-degree turn, nicks the dog on the e-collar and follows with the familiar jerk-and-release correction on the leash and training collar. We call the process "NICK – POP." The nick on the collar is given just prior to the pop on the training collar.

Over a period of sessions, we look for the dog to react to the e-collar correction after it is administered, and before the trainer can make the pop on the training collar. This anticipation shows the dog understands the e-collar correction.

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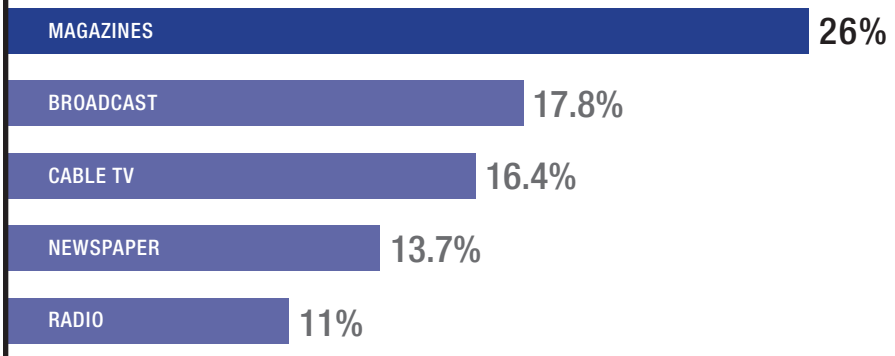

Additionally, Marketing Evolution, a national research and consulting firm, summarized three key findings from their studies:

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The trainer can now eliminate the leash correction and eventually just carries the leash until the dog makes few, if any, errors. At that point, the leash can be discarded and the e-collar correction controls any unwanted behavior during heeling. Thus, good associations are made with correct behavior, and the only negative associations are associated with inappropriate behaviors.

It is easy to extend this simple philosophy to any correction you make involving a leash. One can add the extra dimension of a verbal reprimand into the heeling corrections. Just before the nick correction on the e-collar for forging out, say "NO," making a further classical association. This gives power to your verbal reprimand – it is backed by the compulsive power of the e-collar. Thus, in each context, when you give a verbal correction, the dog will learn to adjust his behavior on the verbal reprimand.

Once the dog learns the e-collar for the heeling context, I teach him in the context of the come command. Then I move to extend the influence of the e-collar to other behaviors. I use the verbal reprimand and e-stimulation pairing to introduce the power of the e-stimulation to many other situations, such as stay commands and corrections for sit and down, and then to commands in controlled aggression. When I give a reprimand verbally, it is backed by the association of the e-collar. If I see the dog about to make a mistake, the reprimand "nips it in the bud" before a physical correction must be given. Correcting a dog just before he makes a mistake is much more effective than correcting him afterward. But you must be a good trainer able to anticipate the errors before they are full-blown errors. Remember, though, for the association to continue to have meaning to the dog, you must reinforce the meaning of the reprimand by following it with an actual correction on the e-collar on a variable basis.

PHOTO BY KATRINA S. KARDIASMENOS, PH.D.

E-collars are now becoming more commonplace in law enforcement and are a valuable tool when used correctly after having been properly trained in the collars usage.

Conclusion • Teaching obedience using negative reinforcement on an e-collar without first conditioning the required escape behaviors is outdated. We must remember stress induced during the training process is cumulative, and using the e-collar correction, which is no doubt very effective, allows the accumulation of stress which can affect overall performance. Stress in learning bleeds over. Dogs do not differentiate between "doing obedience" and "doing searching" or "doing

apprehensions." In police dogs, you may create a very obe dient dog whose grip declines and starts to show stress during biting because he is more concerned with avoiding e-stimulation than biting. The dog may heel around the car when you are trying to get him to search for drugs because it is contextually similar to heeling and he is more concerned with avoiding e-stimulation that comes by being out of heel position than searching for drugs. With all compulsion, a balance must be struck to effectively "put all the pieces together" so we get optimal performance in all areas of the dog's work. Trainers must be sensitive to these crossover effects, and if you decide to employ an e-collar, be sure the trainer is not only familiar with using the device successfully, but is also aware of these crossover effects.

Jerry Bradshaw *is training director and president of Tarheel Canine Training Inc., in Sanford, NC. Jerry has been training dogs for competitive protection sports since 1991, and has competed in national championship trials in both schutzhund and PSA. Jerry has trained many Belgian Malinois to the highest titles in the sports in which he competed. Tarheel Canine Training Inc. is a nationally renowned training facility for police service dogs, and has placed trained police dogs at federal, state and local law enforcement agencies nationally and internationally since 1993. Complete biographies and references for Jerry and the staff of trainers at Tarheel Canine Training Inc. are available at www.tarheelcanine.com.*