

I'm Disciplining My Dog, Not Torturing Her

By Mark Naida

The sticky note on the door jamb did us in. "Your dog has been barking since 10:55 a.m. I can hear it through the walls." My wife and I had taken a short trip to the grocery store and left our Irish setter, Charley, alone in her cage. She barked wildly in our absence.

Charley's bad behavior has added a lot of stress to our lives. By the time the note appeared, we were sick of being pulled down the street during walks and barked at during video calls. Dogs are fun to have and dote on, but we weren't enjoying ours much, especially because we felt we couldn't leave her alone.

So we went nuclear. We bought a prong collar and an e-collar, considered forbidden tools by most dog trainers and pet lovers.

People for the Ethical

Treatment of Animals' description of the prong collar captures the popular sentiment: "Prong collars are designed to punish dogs for pulling by inflicting pain and discomfort. They can cause serious physical and emotional damage to dogs and should never be used."

Exhausted, I gave in and tried a prong collar. I'm glad I did.

In practice, the prongs tighten around the dog's neck when they pull at the leash, giving the animal a clear incentive to walk by your side. If it really hurt, my dog, who is a bit of a sissy despite being an athletic 45 pounds, would yelp. She hasn't yet.

The popular view of the e-collar—which can beep, vibrate and administer a small shock to correct misbehav-

ior—is summed up in a headline on PETA's website: "E-collars: Training Tool or Torture Device?" Guess which side PETA falls on.

We haven't used the shock feature yet. We set it to beep once and vibrate gently when Charley barks, and that seems to have done the trick. The vibration grabs her attention and provides an emotional reset. But if she starts to ignore that correction, we can always try the low-level shock.

For most dog trainers these days, the only acceptable way to train a dog is through positive reinforcement: Reward the dog for good behavior through treats, and teach good behaviors like sitting that replace bad ones like jumping on guests. Proponents think a spritz of water on the muzzle is cruel and ineffective, a smack with a rolled-up newspaper downright abusive.

In theory, it sounds nice and humane. In practice, it's

a slow method. Estimates for having a well-behaved dog using this method run about 18 months.

Halfway there, I realized I didn't have the patience. And despite the guilt I felt at resorting to "torture," the reduction in stress from having a quiet, easy-to-walk dog has been worth it.

Treating dogs "humanely" is a goal that doesn't fit their social behavior. Take any puppy to a dog park and it will run around, barking at other dogs to play. Older dogs will get fed up and lunge, nip or bark at the puppy to get it to calm down. Yet humans should avoid using force whenever possible?

Dog owners who, like me, have found themselves at their wit's end should feel free to show their pets a little tough love.

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