

Your complete guide to natural dog care and training

# Whole Dog Journal™



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# Feeling No Pain

*Training and containing your dog doesn't require distress or discomfort. Period.*

**W**e've got not one, but two articles in this issue that are likely to ruffle some feathers. Both take aim at collars that cause the dogs who wear them to feel pain.

On page 6 is an article by WDJ's Training Editor, professional trainer Pat Miller. She offers descriptions of all of the collar types that are available to dog owners for their dogs, and makes a case for those that function without causing discomfort or anxiety. This is followed on page 10 by an article by another professional trainer, Lauri Bowen-Vaccare, who describes



the many reasons why she and so many other animal-behavior experts strongly oppose the use of electric shock collars as a method of containing dogs without a fence.

There are many owners who use choke chains, pinch collars, and shock collars successfully and without causing behavioral adverse side effects in their dogs. In the hands of owners with a good understanding of training and above-average behavior-observation skills, physical coordination, and timing, choke chains and pinch collars can be used to train many dogs to walk politely on leash with a minimum of pain.

The problem is, many dog owners have little understanding of animal behavior or training, poor animal behavior-observation skills, and bad timing. When you put a tool that works by causing pain in their hands, the result is often poor. Those who consistently hurt sensitive dogs or inadvertently punish dogs when they are doing the *right* thing are likely to produce dogs who resent and/or fear their handlers and/or walking on leash. Handlers who are uncomfortable with or not strong enough to hurt their dogs with these tools almost always end up with dogs who continue to display deplorable behavior on leash – those dogs who just pull right through the discomfort of a tight, choking or pinching collar – but who are also now stressed and anxious about this continual discomfort. Remember, these collars only work when they cause significant pain at the moment when the dog does something undesirable, such as pulling or lunging. If they don't cause pain at the right time, or they cause pain *all* the time, they don't work. In our opinion, and that of the majority of modern professional trainers, it's far more effective and less potentially harmful to teach dog owners to use benign training tools, rather than ones that so frequently produce poor results and adverse side effects.

Similarly, there *are* dogs who can be contained without negative consequences by boundary perimeter systems that work by shocking dogs through their collars. But when these systems cause adverse behavioral side effects, this fallout is often dramatic. The list of potential negative consequences is long, and the real tragedy is that you won't know if your dog might suffer those adverse effects until he has.

NK



# Cleaning Up Fleas

*Flea-control practices that focus on your home and yard, rather than putting toxins on or in your dog.*

Once upon a time, all commercial products that were intended to rid your pet of fleas focused on killing adult fleas. As the study of fleas advanced, researchers realized that killing the adults was never going to be quite enough; if even just a couple of fleas anywhere in a dog's environment avoided getting killed by whatever insecticide was applied, the fleas could repopulate the area fairly quickly. Scientists began looking at how to control some of the flea's other life stages concurrently.

Researchers learned that in a typical census of fleas in a flea-infested household, at any given time, the adult fleas would represent only about one to five percent of the flea population!

Where's the rest of the gang? The studies indicate that, at any given time, flea eggs would make up about 50 to nearly 60 percent of the population in your home. Flea larvae would make up about 35 percent, and the pupae (a life stage of the flea that comes after larvae and before emergence as an adult) about 10 percent.

The job of ridding your home of fleas, then, really consists of taking on both the adults and all the other flea life stages. One could think of the non-adult phases of the flea as another species of pest, given that each stage has differing life needs and vulnerabilities. Because flea eggs, larvae, and pupae all have the potential for turning into fleas, destroying the insects in the non-adult stages is critical to preventing the population from repeatedly bouncing back into your and your dog's lives. Here's a primer on these non-adult stages and how they can be eradicated.

## FLEA EGGS

After adult female fleas feed and mate, they start producing eggs. They lay eggs on their hosts (generally, your dog, cat, or local wildlife), about 25 to 30 eggs at a time, but the



eggs fall off within a few hours. The eggs can land anywhere, but most commonly accumulate where your pets sleep.

In ideal conditions for flea populations – which, by the way, many of our homes just happen to be (optimal conditions would entail temperatures between 80 and 90 degrees Fahrenheit and humidity of about 70 percent or more) – flea eggs hatch in just two to three days. Not all the eggs hatch; some are non-viable. Under-less-than ideal conditions, such as cool temperatures or an extremely dry climate, it may take up to 12 days for the eggs to hatch. Outdoors, the eggs will die if exposed to temperatures below 55 degrees.

## TARGETING: FLEA EGGS

A powerful vacuum with a rotating brush (also known as a beater bar) is a powerful ally in the war on fleas. Frequently vacuuming the areas where our pets hang out indoors can re-

*Frequent vacuuming is the most powerful, nontoxic tool you have at your disposal in the war on fleas. Pay special attention to the areas where your pets spend the most time. And if your dog often rides with you in the car, don't forget to vacuum the car, too!*



move a lot of flea eggs; flea eggs cannot survive the physical trauma of being vacuumed. The thicker or deeper your carpets are, the more difficult it will be to vacuum up all the flea eggs. Vacuum every two to three days for best results.

Flea eggs can survive being wet, but being washed in hot water (more than 140 degrees) and exposure to detergent (which can penetrate the egg's outer "skin") can kill flea eggs. Time in a hot clothes dryer will also kill flea eggs. Dessication (drying out) is more lethal to flea eggs than moisture. Desiccant carpet powders, such as food-grade diatomaceous earth and Flea Stoppers Carpet Powder (a boric acid powder), can help kill flea eggs.

### FLEA LARVAE

Larvae are what you call the things that hatch from viable flea eggs. Get this: The freshly hatched larvae immediately start looking for and eating any non-viable eggs they can find, as well as the feces of the adult fleas. Yum!

It takes about six days to two weeks for the larvae to develop through three

distinct larval stages before they may become a pupa. The larvae avoid sunlight, burrowing deep down into carpets or other substrates.

After they have molted three times, most of the developing larvae start spinning cocoons around themselves; the majority of the larvae develop into pupae in these cocoons, although some (called naked pupae) are able to transition without cocoons.

### TARGETING LARVAE

Vacuuming can remove larvae from rugs, but the deeper your carpet, the less likely your vacuum will be able to reach the larvae. However, if a flea larvae doesn't eat for three days, it will die, so vacuuming to remove non-viable eggs and flea feces (the main food sources for flea larvae) will help starve and kill the larvae.

Larvae like moist areas, but can drown if immersed in water for long. They can survive the usually brief "bath" they may receive from a wet mopping of a kitchen floor, but heavy rainfall outdoors would likely

drown them. Water dissolves flea feces, though, so wet mopping can help destroy one of the flea's food sources.

Flea larvae may be able to survive a washing machine –but fortunately for us, a thorough drying in a hot tumbling dryer kills them. Drying out is more lethal to flea larvae than moisture. So, as with flea eggs, flea larvae can be readily killed by desiccant carpet powders such as food-grade diatomaceous earth and Flea Stoppers if the powders can reach the larvae deep in the base of your carpets.

### FLEA PUPAE

Bad news: The developing fleas that have survived to the pupal stage are the hardest to kill and can survive for the longest period of time of any of the flea life stages.

Cocooned pupae typically develop into adults in seven to 19 days, but cooler temperatures can slow their development time. And once they have matured into adults, they may not leave their cocoons right away; they can stay quiescent in their cocoons for months, waiting for the right conditions and stimuli to emerge.

In more humid environments, the adults emerge more quickly; in dryer climates, the pre-emerged adults stay quiescent longer. The temperature also plays a big role in how long it takes the adults to emerge from their cocoons; in warm climates (think 90 degrees), most adults emerge within a week. At 50 degrees, it might take adults as much as 20 weeks to emerge.

Pre-emergent adult fleas can quickly emerge if they detect a nearby host. Pressure and heat – think, a dog sleeping on his bed – will trigger the adult fleas to emerge from their pupal cocoons. When they do emerge, they need to feed on a host animal within a week or they will die.

### TARGETING PUPAE

Cocooned flea pupae are tough. They can survive dry environments that would dryout and destroy their earlier life stages. Cocooned adults can survive immersion in water. If you manage to vacuum them up, they will die, but

## *The Flea Comb: Inexpensive & Invaluable*

*In our opinion, every pet owner should have a flea comb on hand. These are small combs with teeth that are so closely spaced that when you comb through a dog's coat, any fleas – or pieces of flea poop – that are present will get caught between the teeth of the comb. (Those dark little specks in the comb are flea poop. Where there is flea feces, there are fleas.)*



*Flea combs are invaluable when used as a surveillance tool, to help determine whether any fleas have established a beachhead on your dog or cat. And if you do find fleas, you can use the comb to capture the noxious little insects, removing them from your pet and dropping them into a glass of soapy water to drown.*

*We've known pet owners who were themselves chemically sensitive, or who had chemically sensitive pets, who relied on this tool alone to control fleas. It would be tedious, but it could work. Enlist a powerful vacuum in the war effort and the odds of your victory would improve considerably.*



Photo © Cunaplus | Dreamstime

the cocoons are far harder to vacuum out of carpets than larvae and eggs.

### THERE IS ANOTHER

In the happiest of cases, a dog owner who finds fleas have cropped up in her home can use her powerful vacuum, washing machine, and dryer – and perhaps a *single* dose of a spot-on pesticide or oral flea-killing medication for her dog – and quash the uprising before a population can gain a foothold.

If the blood-sucking settlement has already gotten established in your home, but you are determined to avoid the use of toxic insecticides, consider using a product that contains an insect growth regulator (IGR).

IGRs are chemical compounds that mimic the natural insect hormones that control the insects' growth and prevent them from maturing and reproducing. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) categorizes many IGRs as having “reduced risk” for human health and the environment. And insects are less likely to become resistant to IGRs.

IGRs can be used to control flea populations in several ways. There are topical “spot-on” preparations that contain insecticides to kill adult fleas and IGRs to prevent the maturation of any eggs or larvae. Flea pupae are not as dramatically affected as flea eggs and larvae. There are also IGR sprays

that can be sprayed in the home and yard, concentrating on areas where household pets spend time.

The most commonly used IGRs for flea control are pyriproxyfen and methoprene.

Pyriproxyfen can be found in the topical “spot-on” product K9Advantix II, and in NyGuard and Nyguard, commonly found home and yard sprays. Methoprene can be found in the topical spot-on product Frontline Plus (which also contains the insecticide fipronil). Precor is the best-known “premise” (home and yard) spray that contains methoprene. Sunlight causes these IGRs to degrade; they are effective for less than two weeks outdoors.

### ORAL IGRs

There are also two prescription oral medications for dogs that contain insect growth regulators. Both are made by Virbac Animal Health of Fort Worth, Texas, and both contain the IGR lufenuron, formerly offered by itself in another veterinary prescription product named Program. Virbac discontinued Program, but rolled out Sentinel and Sentinel Spectrum. In our opinion, that's a shame; we like the option of administering a targeted medication if needed, not the shotgun, multi-use approach favored by the drug companies.

Sentinel contains lufenuron plus

*There are many safe, effective weapons against fleas today; there is no reason to let your dog suffer from flea bites.*

milbemycin oxime, which is used for heartworm prevention and for the treatment of hookworms, roundworms, and whipworms. Sentinel Spectrum contains lufenuron, milbemycin oxime, plus praziquantel, which is used for the treatment of tapeworms.

Virbac says lufenuron controls flea populations – we would say, “helps control flea populations” – by preventing the development of flea eggs; it does not kill adult fleas. When a dog is fed a single dose of lufenuron, the eggs of any fleas who are present and feed on the dog will be prevented from developing for 32 days. Keep in mind, however, that using one of these products may pose side effects related to the insecticides they also contain. 🐾

### What you can do

- *A good vacuum is the best tool in the war on fleas. Vacuum your entire home thoroughly and deeply, concentrating on rooms and areas where your dog spends the most time.*
- *Move furniture so you can vacuum underneath and close to furniture legs. Remove cushions and pillows from chairs and sofas, and use a crevice tool to vacuum deep in fabric folds.*
- *Floors should also be vacuumed well. Focus on cracks in hardwood, laminate, or tile floors, and near baseboards.*
- *Don't forget to vacuum your car!*
- *Wash your dog's bedding frequently, at least once a week (but more often is better) in water that reaches at least 140 degrees for at least 10 minutes; bleach in the wash also helps kill flea eggs and developing flea larvae. Dry thoroughly at the highest heat setting.*
- *Consider the use of an insect growth regulator to help break the flea life cycle in your home and yard.*

1

PRODUCT  
REVIEW

# More Collars for Your Dollars

*If you have shopped for a collar only at chain pet-supply stores, you may not be aware of the many types of specialty products available – collars that would better suit your dog's needs.*



*We don't recommend ever using choke chains; in our opinion, dogs can be better trained to not pull without using pain. That said, properly fit and used with good timing and good judgment, choke chains cause enough pain to teach a dog not to pull – but very few people seem to have the skill or knowledge needed in order to use them effectively. As a result, many dogs learn to pull right through the discomfort.*

What type of collar should your dog wear? It depends on your dog, your personal taste, and your training goals, philosophies, and needs. But from our force-free perspective, there are some types of collars we wholeheartedly endorse, some we support with caution, and some that we regard as unnecessary and risky.

## NEVER, EVER COLLARS

Let's get these out of the way first. We recommend that you *never* use collars that are designed to work through the application of pain, discomfort, or aversive sensations, including:

- Choke chains
- Prong collars
- Shock collars (training or no-bark)
- Citronella spray collars
- Any other collar designed to force compliance.

There are numerous current marketing attempts to make these collars more palatable to the public, including attractive, colorful cloth covers for prong collars, rubber tips for the prongs, and euphemisms for shock that range for “stim” and “tickle” to “e-collar” and “e-touch.”

In fact, shock-collar sales reps are quite skilled at convincing their clients that the application of an electrical stimulation doesn't really hurt, while old-fashioned trainers are equally skilled at convincing these clients that the use of force is necessary to train a dog properly. Don't be fooled. Shock hurts. And recent studies overwhelmingly support the position that, while old-fashioned, force-based training methods *can* work, they also come with a significant risk of causing injury (choke chains are known to damage canine tracheas) and creating behavioral problems, especially fear and aggression. These tools and the old-fashioned ways they are typically used often result in shutting dogs down – not something we want to see in *our* dogs. In contrast, we value confident dogs who are willing to *offer* behavior, something that many dogs who have been trained with behavior-suppressing methods don't often do.

The bottom line with all these collars is that they work because they hurt or intimidate your dog – not a good training philosophy.

## SUPPORT WITH CAUTION

Then there are the products we would support the use of, in just the right situation, and in the right hands.

### ■ Head halters or head collars

While there are many different varieties and brands of head collars, they all function by moving the point of attachment from the dog's neck to the dog's head. This gives the handler greater physical control of the dog's head – and where the head goes, the body follows. A dog who is accustomed to pulling hard on





*Head halters can be useful tools, offering smaller or frail owners much-needed leverage to ensure control of a big dog who suddenly forgot his manners and started pulling. But many dogs find wearing them highly aversive, and many owners misuse them.*

*pull hard on the leash, or allow the dog to hit the end of the leash with force when it's attached to a head halter.*

Doing so can badly injure the

dog's neck or even paralyze him. It's critical that handlers are taught how to use this tool properly: gently and with great awareness.

leash with a conventional collar will find that he cannot easily pull while wearing a head collar.

Our first reservation about these collars is that many dogs (perhaps even the majority) find them mildly to extremely aversive. While they look kinder to us than prong and shock collars, if they are aversive to the dog, they are not a force-free training tool.

That said, if the handler takes enough time to properly condition a dog to a head collar, some dogs learn to accept the collars and seem reasonably comfortable with them. Other dogs dislike head halters no matter how much conditioning is done. You can see dogs who have worn these for years but still try to rub them off every chance they get.

Another concern about head halters is that they tend to shut down behavior, so you may think you're seeing a behavior change when, in fact, the dog is so stressed by the head collar that he stops offering unwanted behaviors. In other words, the discomfort of the collar just suppresses the behaviors you don't like; he hasn't learned to exhibit the behaviors you enjoy more in order to earn rewards from you. If you try this collar with your dog, be prepared to discover that your dog is one of the many for whom it is not appropriate because it is aversive.

Our final reservation has to do with the fact that this tool can be used to severely injure a dog if used improperly. *A handler must never yank or*

showing. A slip lead is actually a leash/collar combination, made of a length of nylon or leather with a handle at one end and a ring at the other. The leash is pulled through the ring to form a slip collar at one end. This means that, like a choke chain, the collar part can tighten without limit, so there is potential for choking the dog.

Because dogs in shelters often must be moved quickly without time for collar fitting, this can be an acceptable brief use. (A product with all the convenience and less risk than the slip lead is the martingale variety of the show lead, which can tighten only to a specified point; see "Martingale collars," below). If shelter dogs are to be taken for "real" walks, more appropriate equipment, such as flat collars or front-clip harnesses, should be used.

Show dogs are presumably trained to walk with their handlers, so while those collars sometimes look tight around a dog's neck, it's unlikely the

#### ■ Slip lead / show lead / loop lead

These are collars of convenience, often used by animal shelters and rescues, but also often in conformation

## Collars for Unique Situations



► Dogs who have extremely thin coats may benefit from wearing a fleece-lined collar, which won't rub their hair off like many other materials can. Our favorite fleece-lined collars come from Planet Dog ([planetdog.com/cozy-hemp-adjustable-collar](http://planetdog.com/cozy-hemp-adjustable-collar)). Note that the fleece collars don't come in a size suitable for tiny dogs, however.

► Big, strong dogs who are allowed to pull strongly on leash, such as some dogs who work in law enforcement, tracking, and personal protection, are generally fitted with extra-wide collars, which disperse the pressure over a wider area on the wearer's neck to prevent injury. Buckles on these collars are generally made with one or two metal tongues, rather than plastic or metal side-release buckles, for greatest strength. Check out the offerings from [blockydogs.com](http://blockydogs.com).

► It can also be difficult to find collars that fit tiny dogs well – and often, when you do find a really small collar, the ring is so tiny that it's hard to attach a leash or ID tag. We like this source for stylish small-dog collars: [upcountryinc.com/our-products/category/teacup-collars](http://upcountryinc.com/our-products/category/teacup-collars).

► Nix the jingling! We like collars that can be ordered with your contact information stitched right into the fabric, like these washable, durable bamboo collars from [snazzyfido.com](http://snazzyfido.com).



dog is pulling on them the way an untrained dog might on a choke chain.

The slip leads used in shelters and rescues are generally workmanlike and made of sturdy nylon. In contrast, the ones used in shows are usually made with lightweight leather, nylon, or a thin chain. However, the function is the same, and they all have some potential to choke and cause trachea damage if a dog pulls hard and persistently, or if the handler jerks on them, in a way that they were not intended to be used.

## WHOLEHEARTED ENDORSEMENTS

Without getting name-brand specific, here are the types of collars we do like – and why.

### ■ Flat collar

Your basic flat collar offers you many choices: leather, nylon, cloth; in solid colors, patterns, floral, embroidered, holiday-themed, bejeweled, reflective, glowing, padded; and with buckle or snap fasteners. You can even order

collars embroidered with your phone number, in case your dog goes astray, and others with bow ties for “formal” occasions. A properly fitted flat collar allows you to slip two fingers under the collar (perpendicular to the dog’s neck).

The flat collar is great for everyday use, such as holding ID tags and perhaps for general walking and training purposes. If your dog is a dedicated puller, however, a front-clip control harness is a better choice for walks and

## Why and How to Practice Collar Grabs

While we’re discussing collars, let’s take a moment to talk about collar grabs. I see a worrisome number of dogs who duck away when their human reaches for their collar. This is not only annoying for the human, it is also dangerous. Imagine what happens in an emergency, when the owner needs to quickly corral the dog to keep her out of danger, and the dog ducks away from the reaching hand and runs off.

If your dog has a positive association with being reached for, it could save her life. It’s easy enough to teach with most dogs and well worth the effort. All you need is a supply of tasty treats, and your dog, wearing a collar. Here’s how:

**1** Move one hand toward your dog. Feed a treat from the other hand while your first hand stays in place. Remove both hands at the same time and hide them behind your back.



If your dog moved away when you did this or otherwise had a negative reaction (such as a nervous nose-lick, as seen in the photo), you moved your hand too close to her, or too quickly. Move your hand less

and more slowly on the next trial.

**2** Repeat many times, until, when you present your “reach” hand, your dog looks for the “treat” hand to appear. This “look” is called a conditioned emotional response, or CER.



**3** When your dog consistently offers the desired CER at the distance of your original reach, reach a little farther next time. Keep working at the shorter reach distance until you consistently get the desired CER.

**4** Gradually move your reaching hand closer and closer, getting the desired CER at each new reach distance, until you can touch, and then briefly grasp, your dog’s collar.

**5** When she happily responds to you grasping her collar, ask other people to do the same exercise. Have the person start at Step 1, until your dog is happy about anyone reaching for her (in case she gets away from you and someone else tries to catch her).



training, until she learns how reinforcing it is to stay close to you. (See “The Best Dog Harnesses,” April 2017.)

■ **Martingale collar**

Also called a “limited slip” collar, the martingale has a loop that allows the collar to tighten somewhat, but isn’t intended to choke or give “corrections.” The primary purpose of this collar is to prevent your dog from backing out of the collar, as some dogs learn to do with a flat collar. The loop allows the collar to hang comfortably until the dog pulls back, then the loop tightens just enough to keep it from sliding over the dog’s head. **Note:** Because the loop can get caught on objects, this collar should only be on the dog under supervision, not left on all the time.

Martingale collars are also commonly called “Greyhound collars,” as they are frequently used with this breed, whose narrow heads make it easy for them to slip out of flat collars. However, a martingale collar can also more securely hold thick-necked dogs, such as Bulldogs, whose necks are as wide as their heads are large.

The martingale collar should be fitted so that when the dog pulls it tightens just enough to prevent the dog from backing out of it, but not so tight that it chokes or restricts breathing in any way.

■ **Safety or breakaway collar**

This collar has a mechanism that releases under pressure, to prevent accidental hanging if it gets snagged on something, or choking when two dogs are wrestling and playing collar-grab. The double-ring feature allows you to attach a leash without triggering the breakaway function even if your dog pulls hard. This can be a very useful collar, especially if your dog plays with other dogs who like to grab collars.

The downside is, if you have to

## Avoid These Common Collar Dangers

Even the best collars have the potential to cause harm to your dog if not used wisely. Here are some tips and cautions for proper, safe collar use:

**1 DON’T LEAVE COLLARS ON UNATTENDED DOGS.** Any collar left on an unattended dog has the potential to catch on something and hang the dog. In fact, some agility and barn hunt venues don’t allow dogs to wear collars while they are running the course, for fear that the collar could get caught on something. It is also possible for a dog to get her lower jaw caught in the collar.

While hanging potential is greatest with a choke collar (yes, this sadly happened to a St. Bernard of mine when I was young and too dumb to know better), it can also happen with regular flat collars. I do leave flat collars on my dogs – the tradeoff is that if you remove collars, your dog has no visible identification and may be harder to capture if she does somehow escape. You have to decide what hazard is a more likely threat to your dog’s safety.

**2 DON’T LEAVE COLLARS ON PLAYING DOGS.** Dogs who are playing together can get tangled in each other’s collars, especially if they engage in mouthy play. This, also, happened to one of my dogs: while Darby and Keli were playing, Keli got her jaw caught under Darby’s collar and then spun around, twisting the collar so that Darby was being choked. Fortunately, I was able to pick up Keli and un-spin her, releasing the tension on the collar and allowing the dogs to separate. Neither dog was harmed – but it could have been significantly worse. Dogs have broken their jaws, and others have choked to death in this way.

If you feel you must leave a collar on your dog when he’s playing with other dogs – say, at a dog park – make sure it has a quick-release buckle, or better yet is a safety or breakaway collar, which will release under pressure.

**3 WATCH OUT FOR TAGS ON COLLARS.** Dangling tags can catch on crate wires and heater vents. You can tape tags to the collar so they don’t dangle, or look for a dog tag “pocket” that holds the collars flat against the collar. Slide-on ID tags are available from a variety of sources, including this one: [tinyurl.com/idthagslider](http://tinyurl.com/idthagslider). Alternatively, you can use a collar with your number stitched on it, or use a light-weight ring for the tags that will bend and release under pressure.

grasp the collar suddenly in an emergency, it will come open and pull free from your dog’s neck. Therefore, while it can be useful, it does have limited application, and should not be used if you are in an open space where you may need to grab the collar.

### READY, GO!

If you need help deciding what’s best for you and your dog, find a good force-free trainer who can guide you in making collar decisions that are compatible with your training goals and philosophy.

I’m sharing a terrific quote that was passed on to me, offered by trainer Nicolas James Bishop at a recent conference of the Association of Professional Dog Trainers in Australia: “Punishment gets compliance; reinforcement gets cooperation.” Keep this in mind as you choose your dog’s collar. 🐾

*Author Pat Miller, CBCC-KA, CPDT-KA, of Fairplay, Maryland, is WDJ’s Training Editor. Miller is also the author of many books on positive training. Her newest is Beware of the Dog: Positive Solutions for Aggressive Behavior in Dogs. See page 24 for contact information, information on her classes for dog owners and trainers, and book purchasing details.*

*KeepSafe Break-Away Safety Collar from Petsafe; see [store.petsafe.net/keepsafe-collar](http://store.petsafe.net/keepsafe-collar).*





# Not Shocking

*Animal behavior experts agree that it's wise to prevent unintended negative consequences associated with boundary perimeters that shock your dog – don't use them!*

**D**o you use an underground electric shock fence to contain your dog? Are you considering having one installed? I hope reading this will change your mind.

More and more neighborhoods prohibit or limit the use of fencing, and as this occurs, the use of these non-visible electric shock perimeters has drastically increased. Manufacturers and retailers claim that these products are humane, effective means by which to safely confine dogs without disrupting the aesthetics of neighborhoods. Companies that sell these products generally target families who:

- Live on larger pieces of land
- Don't want to lose their "view"
- Are looking for a cheaper alternative to fencing,
- Live in neighborhoods that prohibit fences or require expensive, decorative styles

Modern dog behavior specialists generally agree that these products are neither safe nor

humane for dogs or humans. Many dog training and behavior professionals have concluded that these products are the source of many fear-based behaviors, including aggression, and are only as effective as the pain and fear they inflict upon the dogs who live behind them.

## DECEPTION IN ADVERTISING

Marketing professionals sell their clients' products by invoking pleasant emotions about the product being presented to the consumer. To achieve this, they sometimes take liberties with facts by skewing them to achieve these ends, incorrectly redefining words like "fence" and "safe," and taking advantage of individuals' personal interpretations of the word "humane."

For a better understanding of how marketing can lead well-meaning families astray, here are the actual definitions of some of the words being used to describe these products.

■ **Fence:** A barrier enclosing or bordering a field, yard, etc., usually made of posts and wire or wood, used to prevent entrance, to confine, or to mark a boundary; a means of protection.

■ **Safe:** Free from harm; not able or likely to be lost, taken away, or given away; not causing harm or injury, especially having a low incidence of adverse reactions and significant side effects when adequate instructions for use are given; having a low potential for harm under conditions of widespread availability.

■ **Humane:** Inflicting as little pain as possible, not cruel, acting in a manner that causes the least harm to people or animals.

## HOW DO THEY WORK?

A non-visible electric-shock perimeter consists of three components: a cable, a transmitter, and a pronged collar.

The cable is buried beneath the ground, surrounding the area in which the dog is to be confined, or from which he is prohibited to en-

*Trainers and owners who have had to deal with the behavioral adverse side effects of being shocked on their own property tend to feel very strongly that these products should never be used.*



ter. Usually, the location of the buried cable is initially marked with a series of flags inserted into the ground in a line.

The transmitter, installed near the buried cable, broadcasts radio signals that travel the length of the cable.

The dog's tightly fitted collar contains a small radio receiver, which receives signals from the transmitter when the dog (and receiver) get within a specified distance from the buried cable. The dog's skin completes an electrical circuit, allowing the prongs, typically half an inch or more in length, to conduct electricity. When the dog steps near, over, or beyond the buried cable, he receives an electrical shock.

## HOW ARE DOGS TRAINED?

Traditionally, a dog is allowed to wander into (or is actually encouraged to walk into) the boundary area – the “shock zone” – in order to receive an electric shock. The unit on the dog's collar makes a beeping sound just before the dog enters the shock zone. This is repeated until the dog clearly indicates that he doesn't want to enter the shock zone (and thus leave the yard), often by freezing, dropping to the ground, pacing and whining, etc. The dog may also yelp, panic, or try to bite.

The handler increases the intensity of the shock if the dog does not exhibit overt avoidance-type behaviors. Eventually, the dog associates the sound of the beep with the physical sensation of the shock. The beep is now a signal that warns the dog of the impending shock, and most dogs learn to stop their forward movement when they hear the beep.

Instead of shocking the dog, some handlers walk the dog on leash near the perimeter flags, jerking him away when the beep sounds. After several repetitions, the dog may avoid the flags because, in his mind, flags and beeps cause annoying or painful leash-jerks. If the handler excludes the beep during training, she negates its function: to provide a warning to the dog.

Some handlers may use food or play to encourage their dog to remain in the safe areas of the yard. However, with-

## Adverse Side Effects

**The following are signs that a dog is experiencing harmful side effects of a non-visible electric-shock perimeter:**

- Pacing back and forth along property lines
- Cowering or running from neighbors or passersby
- Conversely, chasing cars, bicycles, animals, passersby, etc.
- Regression in potty training
- Hesitating or refusing to venture far from the house
- Refusing to leave the house
- Refusing to leave the yard for walks
- Excessive barking and jumping toward people or other pets, especially as they enter or exit the property
- Lying in the middle of the driveway or under or behind vehicles when people try to enter or exit the property
- Refusing to enter or play in certain parts of the yard
- Developing a fear of getting into the car or leaving the property inside of a vehicle

**Dangerous behaviors may appear quickly, or may not appear for a year or more following initial training to the system:**

- Aggressing toward neighbors, passersby, vehicles, etc.
- Aggressing toward people leaving by foot (examples: children getting on the school bus; owner walking to the mail box)
- Nipping or biting children, especially when playing outside
- Attacking other pets or people who are close to the dog, especially in the presence of passersby
- Attacking someone or another animal upon exiting the yard, or a person or animal who enters the yard

out some sort of painful stimuli being paired with the flags or the shock, at some point the dog is bound to attempt to leave the yard and will be shocked.

Some owners are instructed to simply put the collar on their dog and let him into the yard, allowing him to enter the “shock zone” on his own. Families are falsely assured that this will prevent the development of problematic behaviors because they've made no attempt to warn the dog about the shock; it occurs “naturally.”

Once the owner thinks that the dog has been successfully trained to stay in the unfenced yard, the flags are gradually removed, one or two flags at a time, until none remain.

## WHY DO PROBLEMS ARISE?

Many (if not most) of my training colleagues have been consulted by owners of dogs who developed serious behavior problems (such as the ones that appear in “Common Adverse Side Effects,” above) not long after a shock-collar boundary was introduced to their habitat. In many cases, the dogs' owners were mystified. How and why did this happen?

Dogs are motivated by what works for them. They gravitate toward safety and avoid danger. Non-visible shock perimeters take advantage of the dog's survival instinct: what lies beyond the yard harms (shocks) them, so the dogs try to protect themselves.



Many of the problematic behaviors related to these products are caused by the initial training process. Others are a result of the constant threat of being shocked, similar to a dog who, after being swatted with a newspaper several times, may become frightened of newspapers in general; if his just owner picks up or touches one the dog stops whatever he's doing because newspapers are dangerous.

Some dogs are willing to suffer the shock to investigate something outside of their yards. Some may not even notice the shock because they are so highly aroused. These dogs may also develop unsafe behaviors. Boredom may be the culprit for dogs in the first category, and over time they may become desensitized to the shock. This does not mean that the dog has forgotten about the shock – the threat is still there, but the shock has become irrelevant in some situations.

Dogs in the second category tend to be high-energy, highly motivated working breeds, although any breed of any size or age may break through a non-visible shock perimeter, especially if highly aroused. When stress-hormones levels spike, the dog essentially “turns off” to everything else, and his body does not perceive a signal from the brain when he is shocked.

**BUT WAIT,  
THERE'S MORE**

Here are other drawbacks associated with these systems:

- There is no protection for your dog from other animals, humans, vehicles, etc. coming in from outside the “fence.”
- Dogs often associate the shock with things that are present or nearby when he's been shocked, like other animals, family members, or yard decorations, and can react badly to them as a result.
- Collars can short out when they get

wet, increasing the risk of malfunction and injury.

- Collar malfunctions can lead to constant shocking or none at all.
- Dogs may get stuck in the shock zone, unable to move, causing intensified, long-lasting pain, increasing the likelihood of injury and a bite to anyone who may reach to pull them out.
- Electronic devices on the same frequency (such as garage-door openers) can trigger random shocks.
- Dogs may generalize the beep to similar sounds made by microwaves, car door locks, utility vehicles, etc. and develop a phobia to those sounds.
- Manufacturers instruct that collars be worn for no more than 10 to 12 hours at a time, but many product trainers advise that dogs wear them constantly, claiming this prevents the development of adverse effects.
- Dogs may need regular retraining.
- Dogs who leave the yard often don't return, even if the collar is removed.
- Dogs can learn to run down the battery by waiting where the beep occurs until the beep stops so they can leave without getting shocked.
- The signal only goes to a certain height, and some dogs learn to jump higher and/or will walk out if snow piles up.
- Dogs may run from the yard in panic during storms, fireworks, when gunshots are heard, etc.
- An owner may be liable for any injuries or damages, including medical and veterinary bills, counseling and behavior modification, or property damage associated with events resulting from the dog leaving the yard.

- Homeowner Associations which prohibit fences and other outdoor confinement may be responsible for injuries, deaths or damages caused by a loose dog, and/or injury or death of a loose dog, particularly those which require dog owners to use these products.
- Many breeders, shelters, and rescues will not place dogs in homes where these products are used.
- Dogs in multi-dog families may feel the shock at different intensities.
- If the dog is put on the system during one of the critical fear periods of development, the adverse side effects may be more severe.
- Owners and veterinarians have reported moderate-to-severe bacterial infections, contact necrosis, and electrical burns, from the use or misuse of these systems.

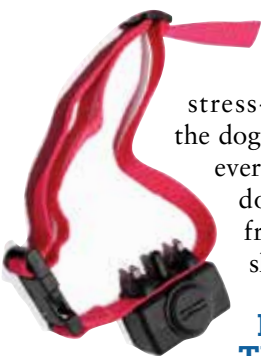
**CONCLUSION**

Given the ample anecdotal and scientific evidence, it's clear that electric-shock perimeters have detrimental effects that can cause moderate to severe behavioral and physiological problems in dogs, and also pose a threat to the communities in which they are used.

Frankly, if it's not visible, it isn't a fence. If something that is marketed as a protective product works by purposely inflicting pain and/or fear on the subject it's supposed to protect, it's neither safe nor humane.

What does this mean for dogs and their families? Simply put, a visible, physical barrier always trumps the absence of a physical barrier, especially when the product in question is so widely known to yield such an abundance of harmful side effects. 🐾

*Lauri Bowen-Vaccare, owner of Believe In Dog, LLC, is a member of the Pet Professional Guild. Her specialties include reactivity, resource guarding, bringing outside dogs in, outside dogs, and transitioning to a new home. See page 24 for contact information.*





# Fitness for Aging Dogs

*How to lead your dog through exercises that will help her stay sound and active through her senior years.*

When we live with and see our dogs every day, we don't always notice the little changes that age brings, especially when we have more than one dog. All of a sudden our senior dog can appear old – and we hardly noticed the minute signs of aging along the way.

Maybe it's that your dog no longer runs as far or as long in the park. Maybe she's not as comfortable jumping up on the bed or into the car. Or maybe she doesn't get up as often to follow you around as she used to. When our dogs lose the ability to function as well as they used to, it's difficult to know what to do.

Many clients bring their aging dogs to me for private sessions because they have started having difficulty or reluctance with – or can no longer perform – normal life activities like climbing stairs, getting into the car, or walking on smooth flooring. These problems are often related to muscle atrophy in the hind end. Once the dogs get the all-clear from their veterinarian, we work on fitness exercises designed to rebuild hind-end strength; we increase the difficulty of the exercises slowly over time until more function returns.

It should be obvious that there are cases where a dog is suffering from more than age-related muscle atrophy. If you suspect this is the case, see your veterinarian for diagnosis. Also, watch for hearing and vision loss – these changes often occur and can affect behavior and function quite a bit. I can't stress enough how important it is for your dog to get regular checkups by your veterinarian, especially as your dog ages.

We know that everything slows down with age. We also know that studies show exercise prolongs life, as does weight management, and that using and exercising the brain holds off



mental deterioration. The similarities are great enough that it's safe to extrapolate that what applies to senior humans applies to our senior dogs, too. So let's keep our aging dogs' minds and bodies more active through some simple fitness exercises! The dogs' quality of life will improve with more physical and mental activities – and our quality of life may improve as well, if our dogs regain function and need less help with everyday activities.

## BENEFITS OF FITNESS EXERCISES

Gentle and effective exercise prevents loss of independence and mobility in the aging dog. Fitness exercises keep our aging dogs functioning with confidence in everyday life and can improve:

- **Proprioception:** This is the unconscious perception of movement and spatial orientation arising from stimuli within the body itself. Dogs lose proprioception as they age, but they can regain some with targeted fitness exercises.

*These simple exercises help all dogs, but especially senior dogs like 10-year-old Otto, maintain (or restore) core strength, balance, and proprioception – plus, they are fun!*

■ **Muscle strength:** Dogs lose muscle strength as they age, especially in the hind end. Dogs can regain muscle strength with fitness exercises, developing hind end, core, and stabilizing muscles as well as front-end (shoulder) muscles.

■ **Gait:** A dog's gait can gradually decline due to weakening muscles, pain, compensatory movement that becomes habitual, and loss of proprioception that occurs with aging. Gaits can improve with specific fitness exercises.

■ **Balance and stability:** Along with flexibility, balance and stability can be regained with fitness exercises.

■ **Endurance:** This often reduces with aging. Fitness and conditioning exercises improve physical stamina and/or endurance. Your senior can then manage longer hikes, sports activities, walking, and running.

■ **Confidence:** Confidence often blossoms as a result of a fitness program, probably because the dog is succeeding, getting stronger, and getting reinforced often for fitness-related behaviors. I think that the increase in body awareness also helps with confidence.

■ **Attitude and focus:** Focus often improves from doing fitness exercises. Attitudes change for the better when the dog can learn to focus again and feels more confident.

## GETTING FITNESS BEHAVIORS

When training fitness exercises, just as in training any behaviors, you can use shaping, luring, prompting, or capturing.

- Shaping consists of reinforcing successive approximations along the way to the final goal behavior.
- Luring consists of encouraging the dog to follow something he wants, usually food, then giving it to him as he performs the desired movement. Be sure to use a lure as

few times as needed (i.e., two or three times) to get the dog to do the desired behavior, then “fade” (discontinue) the lure. The movement you made with the food or toy can become a hand signal or prompt.

- Prompting involves encouraging or assisting with an aid that helps the dog understand the desired behavior.
- Capturing is done by reinforcing the dog when she naturally performs the behavior on her own.

When you see movement toward, or achievement of, the actual goal behavior, “mark” that moment with an auditory or visual marker (such as the flash of a penlight or the click of a clicker) and then reward your dog to reinforce the behavior. I use verbal markers and clickers to mark behaviors. You can use a variety of reinforcers. I usually use very small, yummy treats.

The exercises in this article provide a good fitness foundation for any dog and can be challenging for aging dogs. Work slowly, take video, and work to sharpen your observation skills. It's extremely important for you to see your dog's physical alignment. His spine should be in a neutral position and his legs under his hips and shoulders during these exercises. I also think it's important to look for the joy on our dog's faces during these exercises.



*It looks so simple, but walking and trotting over poles requires your dog's concentration, balance, and coordination.*

Note: I never push a dog into position as a way to get behavior. I want dogs to learn to interact with us and any equipment willingly. I find that rushing or pushing dogs onto equipment is not beneficial for the dog. In fact, it can make the dog avoid the equipment in the future or could actually injure the dog. Dogs have more confidence when they get to choose to participate in training, including fitness exercises.

When your dog makes an error, you can cue something simple, such as a nose-to-hand touch, so your dog succeeds. Then reinforce him (feed him a treat) in a position that helps him be ready for the next cue.

## PREREQUISITES

Before doing these exercises with your aging dog, get an all-clear to move ahead from your veterinarian. If your dog is overweight, work on weight management first. Also, it's crucial your dog has properly trimmed nails.

## FITNESS EXERCISES

The following exercises are a good foundation set to do for aging dogs. They use a variety of muscles that contribute to your dog's core strength, flexibility, and balance.

### ■ Walk Over Short Poles

Lay some poles on the ground or on something that elevates them no more than two inches off the ground. The spacing should match the length of your dog from her withers to the

base of tail or from the ground to the top of her withers. The poles can be round or flat but not more than two



inches wide; broomsticks or lengths of one-inch PVC pipe are ideal. If the poles are on the ground and may easily roll, you can use painters tape to hold them in place. You could also place poles or a mop and broom over two-inch tall tuna cans and use painters tape to hold them in place.

Walk your dog slowly back and forth over the poles a couple of times. Look forward rather than at your dog.

You can place mats on the ground a few feet from the end of your row of poles so your dog has something to focus on as he walks or trots over them. Reinforce your dog on the mat

for doing this exercise without hitting the poles.

If your dog hits the poles every time,

change the height or the spacing of the poles. Determine if your dog improved or not. Also, try going slower to see if that makes a difference.

As long as your dog isn't hopping or hitting the poles, you can continue with this exercise. Aim for 10 to 15 repetitions of crossing all of the poles in walking. You can also try trotting the dog over the poles as a separate exercise.

This exercise is good for the hip flexor muscles and for proprioception. I do this exercise with most aging dogs who enter my practice, including as a warm-up exercise.

### ■ Standing Leg Lift-and-Hold

The goal is for the dog to shift weight onto three legs while lifting her fourth leg. Ask for each paw to be lifted in turn (hopefully via a cue such as holding out your hand).

**Important:** Please do this on a non-slippery surface, and *do not force* your dog to lift her paw. If she doesn't want to lift a paw, try again later. Continue with this exercise if your dog can easily give you a paw and therefore do a weight shift while standing.

If you can't lift a paw or

two, that's fine; assume that it's not easy or comfortable for your dog at this time. You can try again at another time, such as when she first gets up or after she's been walking around a bit. It's always good to check in with your veterinarian to make sure there isn't a medical reason for her to want to keep her paws on the ground.

When you lift one of your dog's front paws, support her elbow joint. When you lift a hind paw, support the stifle/knee joint. I demonstrate this in the following video.

#### LEG LIFT-AND-HOLD DEMONSTRATION

• [tinyurl.com/WDJ-fitness-3](http://tinyurl.com/WDJ-fitness-3)

Observe the weight shift. When the dog lifts her front right paw, her weight shifts to her left hind paw. Can you see this happening?

Leg lifts are important for balance and postural muscles. Doing leg lifts also ensures that both sides of the body work. You can take the leg lifts even further by lifting a leg and holding it up for progressively longer periods, building duration for an increase in balance and strength. Here's how:

At this point, you've determined that your dog can lift each leg and stay in position and balance for a few seconds. Your dog should be standing as squarely as possible, with her front paws under her shoulders and her back paws under her hips. If your dog has balance issues, then have her in a well-fitting harness so you can support her with your hand, if needed.



- Ask for a paw lift; I usually start with a front paw. You might have to help bring the paw up. *Do not* force this.
- Hold the leg directly under the shoulder or hip, being sure to support the flexed joint (elbow or stifle/knee). Don't bend the leg more than is needed to lift it.
- Hold the paw up for five to 10 seconds. Build duration gradually by adding two to five seconds each week until you reach 20 seconds. Increase duration only when your dog is comfortable at the current duration.
- Do a set of two to three holds per leg every other day.

Your observation skills are incredibly important as your dog progresses. Video yourself and your dog so you can really see what happens during this exercise.

Watch the videos of Cassie doing more advanced versions of this exercise.

In video #4, Cassie is doing leg lifts on foam padding on a massage table. Watch how she carefully adjusts her balance before lifting each leg. In video #5, Cassie is standing on rubbery inflated discs; she has to really work to maintain her balance while she lifts and holds each leg up. This is a highly advanced version of the lift-and-hold exercise. It's hard work and should be rewarded accordingly!

### ■ Sphinx-Down and Sphinx-Down to Stand

This exercise will likely be different from the "down" you learned as an exercise in dog sports. If this is the case, use a different cue for this exercise so that the two are distinct and unique behaviors.

For this exercise, start with your dog standing. Make sure her paws are

#### ADVANCED LEG LIFT-AND-HOLDS

- [tinyurl.com/WDJ-fitness-4](http://tinyurl.com/WDJ-fitness-4)
- [tinyurl.com/WDJ-fitness-5](http://tinyurl.com/WDJ-fitness-5)



### SPHINX-DOWN DEMONSTRATION

• [tinyurl.com/WDJ-fitness-6](http://tinyurl.com/WDJ-fitness-6)

until you reach five to 10 per set.

You can do as many as two to three sets every other day. Do *not* ask your dog to do strengthening exercises every day.

### ■ Two Paws Up

A wonderful strengthening exercise for your dog's hind end is a form of "perch work" or "two paws up." Your dog will stand with her two front feet on a slightly elevated object or surface.

To start, you can use a two-inch-thick book that is a few inches wider than your dog's stance (measuring to the outside of each paw) or you can use a two- to three-inch-high platform. If using a book, I suggest wrapping it in duct tape and then wrapping it in anti-slip material.

Put the book or other platform on the floor only after you've made a plan and filled your treat pouch. Be ready to mark the behavior you are looking for, then reinforce with a yummy, small, soft treat.

You can lure your dog up the first two to three times, but be sure to fade the lure quickly. Go from a treat in your hand to using your hand as a prompt. Once your dog puts both front paws on the platform, click and treat (mark and reinforce) a few times, ending the behavior with a click and treat *off* of the platform.

It should be relatively easy for your dog to step up on the book. If your dog cannot do this, be sure to bring this up with your veterinarian in case there is a medical issue preventing her from being able to do this.

Remember to watch for fatigue and to give your dog plenty of breaks. You are looking for joy on your dog's face and excitement when you bring out the book or the platform. When you are ready for a break or to stop training, toss a treat for your dog (I say, "All done!") and pick up

the book or platform, to make it clear to your dog that the training session is over.

Once the behavior of stepping up with two paws on the book is solid, you can build duration. I suggest that you initially build duration to about 10 seconds per repetition up on the book and that you do three repetitions per set. If your dog is strong in the hind end, ask for a duration of 20 seconds.

After about seven to 10 days at 10 (or 20) seconds per repetition and three repetitions per set, you can then add another five seconds. Gradually build up to 30 seconds per repetition by adding five seconds every seven to 10 days. Keep your dog at 30 seconds per repetition for at least seven to 10 days before you increase the height of the platform.

Once your dog is completely comfortable keeping her front paws up for 30 seconds for seven to 10 days, you can increase the height of the platform to as much as four to six inches. But – this is important – when you raise the platform, you must reduce the duration that you ask your dog for. Return to 10 seconds, and then build to 30 seconds after another week or two.

As long as your dog finds this exercise to be easy and fun, you can continue to increase the height of the platform. Just make sure that each time you increase the height, you reduce the duration on the platform back to 10 seconds, and then build up to 30 seconds after another week or two.

Stop adding height once your dog can work comfortably at your goal height. The typical height of a stair is eight inches; this is the goal height (with your veterinarian's approval) for many medium and large dogs. For shorter

and smaller dogs, or dogs with physical issues, the goal height might be two or four inches.

Tip: One thing you want to watch for is the widening of your dog's hind



legs. If your dog is standing wider in the hind legs when her front paws are on the platform, then the exercise is too difficult. Reduce the number of repetitions, the height, and/or the duration of the exercise so she can do it without widening her stance. It's possible you moved through the steps too quickly.

**OUTSIDE FITNESS WORK**

While you are out walking, you can find all sorts of surfaces for your dog to put two front paws up on, such as curbs, large rocks, and logs. Putting her front feet up will put more weight on her hind end, which is what we are after. Just be sure to support your dog, if needed, on uneven surfaces. A well-fitting harness that doesn't restrict movement is ideal for both walking your dog and supporting her during fitness exercises. (Of course, as the creator of the Balance Harness® by Blue-9 Pet Products, I recommend that one!)

Look for hills or inclines to walk or

run up as many times as you can. Another beneficial exercise for outdoors is zigzagging down hills, which works one side of the body at a time. Sphinx-downs are also fun to practice in the park. Practicing spins in each direction can increase and maintain flexibility throughout the spine.

In warm weather, my dog Cassie walks or powers through shallow water and swims regularly in the local lakes. She also rides on a stand-up paddleboard, which is great for balance and stability muscle work for us both.

**GOOD FORM AND FUN**

The most important thing is that you and your dog enjoy these exercises and be safe doing them. Strengthening exercises should be done every other day, not daily.

I highly recommend finding a professional who can initially go through the exercises with you and your dog, to ensure your dog is in proper alignment

and can safely do the exercises. Professionals who can help include Certified Canine Rehabilitation Practitioners or Therapists (CCRP or CCRT) and Certified Canine Fitness Trainers (CCFT). Regular practice, with good form, should help your dog enjoy herself and function better in her senior years. 🐾

*Lori Stevens has certifications and expertise in behavior consulting, canine massage, canine fitness, and Tellington TTouch Training. She is the creator of the Balance Harness® (Blue-9 Pet Products), and has an established companion animal practice in Seattle, WA. The most recent of her DVDs is called "Gift of a Gray Muzzle: Active Care for Senior Dogs" and is co-presented with Kathy Sdao (Tawzer Dog Videos, 2017). Lori also teaches online classes for Fenzi Dog Sports Academy; her six-week course, "Helping Dogs Thrive: Aging Dogs," which includes bodywork, fitness, and movement for aging dogs, begins on December 1. For contact information, see page 24.*



# DOG DAYS— All Year Long!

For a dog lover, this is the perfect calendar! Not only will you meet a dozen of the most winsome, lively calendar canines we could find, but also, each month you'll get timely, pertinent guidance for keeping your own dog healthy and happy throughout the year. In this year's edition, each month is introduced with suggested goals – achievements that can improve the relationship between you and your dog!

WDJ's 2018 Calendar is generously sized to make it easy for you to fill in birthdays, anniversaries, vet appointments, and all the dates you need to remember.

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# Feeling Alone in a Group?

*The pros and cons of group instruction and how to maximize the experience for your dog.*



*It's natural to become disappointed and frustrated when you pay for a group dog-training class and your dog or puppy is too frightened or overstimulated to take part in the lessons on the syllabus. Take a breath, though, and consider that the experience can be used to teach your dog different – and just as valuable – lessons.*

Group training classes are a mixed bag of pros and cons. And I say this as someone who has made a fair amount of my annual income by teaching group training classes. I also attend group classes with my own dog.

The most obvious “pro” is the cost. In a group training situation, the economic cost is leveraged, allowing each student to pay less per hour compared to private instruction. It's next to impossible to maintain a training facility without offering some group classes.

“The trade-off is that both humans and dogs are trying to learn new information in the worst possible situation,” says Hannah Branigan of Wonderpups dog training in Raleigh, North Carolina, and host of the popular training podcast, “Drinking From the Toilet.” “We always tell people we want them to train the dog in a low-distraction environment, and then, look how we teach them to do that!”

Some dogs are better able to withstand this challenge than others.

By design, the “ideal candidate” for a positive-reinforcement group manners class is the generally happy-go-lucky, emotionally stable, food-oriented dog whose worst transgression is maybe a minor lack of impulse control, simply because he hasn't yet been taught how to do better – that's why he's there.

But in the real world, owners with dogs representing a wide range of temperaments and behavioral challenges find their way to group classes looking for help. Some dogs are fearful and hide under the chair. Some are fearful and reactive. Some are frustrated-greeter types and vocalize their frustration, loudly and persistently.

## MAKING IT WORK

Most of the time, each of these types of dogs can be successfully accommodated in a group class, but doing so requires careful management on the part of the instructor, to adjust the class environment and tailor individual ex-

ercises accordingly. For the owner, it means letting go of expectations and learning how to recognize the small victories for her own dog, even when those victories don't look anything like what's happening with other dog-and-handler teams.

Skilled instructors will be well-equipped to support these teams in ways that decrease distress and make it easier for all the dogs in class to succeed. Increasing distance from whatever is causing a fearful dog to react (whether it's the unknown dogs or unknown people), and/or implementing visual barriers are two great strategies that help create an environment where an anxious dog can begin to relax.

### ALONE IN A GROUP

When people enroll in a basic obedience or "manners" class, they usually expect to work on skills: sit, down, stay, come-when-called, etc. But if their dog is challenged by the environment or concerned about or overexcited by some facet of his surroundings, that must be dealt with first.

It can be frustrating for the owner who really wants to start teaching those basic skills to her dog to have to delay that process for weeks – in class, at least. But consider that we, too, would find it difficult to concentrate on, say, learning a foreign language if we were also worried about reports of an escaped axe-murderer in our neighborhood, or while gushing with excitement over meeting our favorite celebrity crush. Before we were able to start conjugating verbs, we'd need time to feel safe, or for our head to come down from the clouds. We'd want our instructor to be patient and give us time, and/or help us recalibrate our emotions. Our dogs are the same!

Realistically, this might mean shifting your focus from basic skills, such as "sit" or "down," to heavily reinforcing quiet behavior in your reactive dog via

a rapid-fire string of high-value treats, or calmly rewarding the bolder moves of your fearful dog under your chair. When you've come to class expecting to work on "sit," "down," and "come," it can be difficult to suddenly change your priorities, even when doing so is in the best interest of the dog. This is especially true when it seems like, compared to students working on skills, you aren't "doing anything."

In my experience, this often leads to owners trying even *harder* to get their dogs to engage in whatever skills exercise is taking place in class, often reaching for "bigger and better treats" in hopes of sustaining their dog's attention long enough to lure him into position. Here's the problem with that:

While it's true that successful food-based dog training requires using food that's of significant value to the learner, constantly trying to "up the ante" often means we're asking the dog to do something he's not yet able to handle. When the dog is struggling to "sit" because he's feeling unsafe in the environment, or can't "lie down" because he's too over-stimulated by the other dogs, improving his emotional state is more important than squeaking out a half-hearted "sit" or "down" for the sake of keeping up with the rest of the

class. Listen to your dog – he will tell you what he needs the most in the moment. You're in class to help your dog, not to keep up with the Joneses. Once your dog's emotional state improves, the basic skills behaviors will come.

### A SLIPPERY SLOPE

Trying too hard to "keep up" can actually cause more harm than good.

"My concern is, if we're leading dogs around with food, we might accidentally lead them outside of their comfort zone," says Branigan. Just because a dog is eating, she says, doesn't mean he's comfortable, and it's easy to accidentally lead a dog beyond where he'd choose to go if not for the cookie in front of his nose.

The danger of this inadvertent over-facing is that the dog may be suddenly pushed over his personal coping threshold; he may become reactive, overly excited, or shut down completely, depending on his unique emotional and behavioral challenges. When training, it's always better to set dogs up for success via a series of baby steps, i.e., to systematically teach them how to swim before letting them fall (or throwing them) into the pool!

"Getting a dog through a training class with a piece of hot dog on his nose



*Don't focus on the fact that you and your dog are sequestered behind a visual barrier from the rest of the class; celebrate when your dog finally relaxes! He will get out from behind the curtain eventually!*

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does little to help solidify the skills he'll need at home when, say, a baby is on the way," adds Branigan. "We're increasing his ability to follow food in a specific context, but that doesn't necessarily carry over into real-life situations. Be careful not to mistake a dog's ability to perform correctly in the presence of food with a solid understanding of the behavior." (For more on this, see "What Does Your Dog Really Know?" December 2015.)

To be fair, it's hard to be in a group situation and watch other teams appear to have more success while your dog sits cautiously under the chair, or while you concentrate on rewarding an absence of barking as other teams mingle about.

"It feels horrible!" says Branigan, "so people feel like they have to do something. Most of us have that bias toward action. We say, 'This is uncomfortable and embarrassing; I need to *do* something to change this.' But, in our desperate attempt to feel better, we put our long-term training goals at risk by potentially over-facing our dogs or tricking ourselves into believing our dog is learning an obedience skill when he's really just half-heartedly following food."

### WHAT TO EXPECT

As a trainer, I know it's likely that the "shy" puppy sitting under the chair will come around if given the opportunity to learn he is safe. I also know that the "reactive" dog is capable of learning how *not* reacting in the presence of his triggers will "pay" really well, especially when we pair well-timed reinforcement with a little environmental support, such as increased distance and visual barriers.

This can be harder for pet owners to understand, especially if it's their first dog, or their first "challenging" dog. Branigan says it's helpful for trainers to let clients know what to expect ahead of time, before they're in the heat of the moment and potentially feeling embarrassed or frustrated.

"It's ideal if clients head into the class situation knowing there's a chance their dog won't be able to focus and

take food, or there's a chance he might sit under the chair, but also knowing the trainer has seen that before. If they have been prepared and understand that the trainer knows what's going on, and she has contingency plans for their type of dog already built into the class, it helps take the emotion out of it, and helps people make better choices while training," Branigan says.

Be realistic about what might happen. If your dog excitedly barks when he sees other dogs on a walk, there's a good chance he's going to bark when he sees six other dogs in a crowded classroom. If your dog is shy when meeting new people, suddenly finding himself in a room full of strangers might be overwhelming. Even if he's a happy-go-lucky hound, sometimes dogs surprise – and even embarrass us – in a group setting. Remember, it's all okay! That's why you're there – to learn how to best help your dog!

### NOBODY'S JUDGING YOU

As a trainer, I know that all of these types of dogs are more than capable of learning how to sit, lie down, stay, and come-when-called if we present the lessons in a less-challenging environment. If your dog's biggest challenge is coping with the group environment, with the help of the instructor, use class time to teach your dog how to feel better about being in a group. That victory is just as great – if not greater – than a sit, down, or stay for a dog who doesn't struggle with the environment.

You can also use the time to focus on your handler skills using an imaginary dog as your dog quietly enjoys a food-stuffed Kong toy while safely tucked behind a visual barrier. Often, this is much easier than trying to refine your handling skills while simultaneously wrangling a reactive dog! All this handling practice more than pays off when it comes time to practice at home, where your dog is most comfortable and will likely be able to succeed in learning his lessons in the absence of all the class distractions.



## TRAINING IS A JOURNEY, NOT A RACE

Sometimes, it really is a better choice to withdraw from the group class in favor of working privately with the instructor in a less-distracting environment, or to attend the class without the dog to focus on your handling skills without over-facing your dog. Should this happen, it's important to not feel like your dog "flunked out" of school!

What matters most is finding ways to support your dog as you work toward your long-term training goals, not pushing yourselves to fit in or keep up with a group. Not every training situation is right for every dog at every point of his training journey – and that's okay. What's important is finding what works best for you and your dog as a team. 🐾

*Stephanie Colman is a writer and dog trainer in Southern California. See page 24 for contact information.*

### What you can do

- **Don't feel pressured to "keep up" with the group. Listen to your dog. He will tell you what he needs most in the moment. Honoring this will support your long-term training goals.**
- **Recognize and celebrate your successes!**
- **Be realistic about your dog's needs. Some dogs benefit more from private or semi-private lessons, depending on their needs.**

## Important in Sport-Dog Classes, Too!

While this article primarily focuses on traditional "manners" classes, the same considerations apply when participating in a sport-dog class, such as agility, rally, flyball, or competition obedience. We asked several dog-sport enthusiasts to share how they make group classes work for them:

"When I was taking my dog to agility class, something scary (in his mind) happened one day, and he couldn't emotionally handle an entire class session anymore. We started participating in just half of the class, and spent the rest of the time playing fun games and working on desensitizing him to scary noises. It worked really well. It was great of the instructor to suggest this, rather than having to drop the class." – Beth O., California

"I did a novice obedience ring-readiness class with my Whippet, who, at the time, basically knew sit, down, and loose-leash walking. I told the instructor ahead of time that my main goal was to get her comfortable working around distractions. While other students worked on traditional competition heeling patterns, we did the same pattern, but with loose-leash walking. The class was great for helping her become comfortable at the training club and around other dogs, and we picked up a few obedience tips at the same time." – Wendy M., Florida

"My dog struggles with focus around distractions. He wants to look at and sniff everything around him. We've taken multiple group classes where we sit in the back and I reward every time he offers a moment of focus. Sometimes we have really good days. On those days, we participate in what the group is doing. Other days it's too hard for him to focus on what I'm asking him to do, so we quietly concentrate on our focus games instead." – Asha M., Delaware

"My dog is shy around people, and we're in a group rally class. There are often several people up working at once. The instructors are mindful of where people are situated, and they're also fine with me doing whatever my dog is comfortable with that day. I enjoy being able to see how other students perform the signs, and I pick up training tips I can use when we practice at home." – Rachel O., Hampshire, U.K.

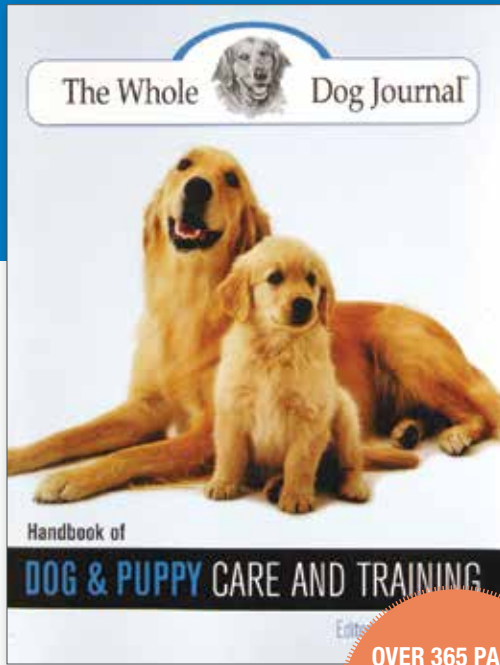
There are plenty of ways to modify participation in a group class so that it works better for your dog. Just be sure to communicate with the instructor about your needs, and make sure your alternative plans don't negatively impact other working teams.

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WDJ Training Editor Pat Miller is author of many books on force-free, pain-free, fear-free training, including her most recent, *Beware of the Dog: Positive Solutions for Aggressive Behavior in Dogs*, available from [wholedogjournal.com](http://wholedogjournal.com)

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