

Electronic Dog Training

Once people become familiar with electronic training products and use them properly, they find the methodology is proven, efficient, economical, and ethical.

The type of training in which an electronic aid is used is critically important, for it will influence the type of product and methods used. Is the equipment being used to teach a new obedience command, correct some common misbehavior, or is it being used to reinforce another electronic training methodology?

Factors affecting success

Before an electronic training tool is used, it is strongly suggested that the entire training situation be re-examined. There are three major considerations in this re-evaluation:

Does the owner know what he is doing, does he understand the training process, and can he apply proper methodology to a specific situation?

Is the owner training the dog properly, does he have a plan for this specific misbehavior, and is he executing that plan appropriately and correctly?

Is the dog trainable? Is the dog in question stubborn, set in his ways, or unintelligent?

(We believe that all dogs are trainable. Dogs that seem stubborn, or unintelligent, have simply not been trained properly, consistently, or effectively.)

Of these factors, the first two are most important. If training is not successful, in most cases it is because owner education, preparedness, consistency or commitment is lacking. This may be difficult for some owners to accept, but remember that we have invited dogs into our environment. It is our responsibility to teach them in ways they can understand. This is incredibly important, because if an owner has not taken the time, or applied the appropriate techniques properly and consistently, training with an electronic product will not make a difference. It will only confuse even the smartest dog.

There are certain signals that suggest a dog has not been properly trained. In these instances a dog may:

Resist when his owner attempts to place a collar around his neck.

Withstand correction, of any type, in the presence of certain distractions

Control his owner by acting timid or by ignoring his owner

Panic when he senses a warning.

Attempt to escape when receiving a correction

Do anything except the behavior necessary to avoid the correction.

Education is the key. If an owner takes the time to understand electronic training - why it works, how it works, how to apply the appropriate techniques - it can be a beneficial tool.

Electronic training requires knowledge and skill

Why the concern for proper education? Because of the largest variable in the equation - the owner. Let us face it, humans are very unpredictable, as far as dogs are concerned. The response of most owners to the need for correction varies widely, depending on the dog, the training, the situation at hand, and even the mood they happen to be in at the time. This is not conducive to effective training - of any kind.

In most cases, a dog exhibits a behavior in response to some stimulus or distraction. Owners must be careful not to create yet another, different misbehavior by misapplying the correction, or applying it at the wrong time. And, for the safety of the dog, it is unnecessary to correct it for every little thing. Owners must be selective to avoid canine confusion. When applied properly, electronic training can be done successfully. To help understand this, let us examine how people respond to their dog without electronics.

Dog owners respond to their dog in any number of different ways. They may reward their dog by petting, talking, providing food or treats, playing, or letting them sleep on the bed. The list is as long as there are owners on it. These same owners also correct in various ways, including yelling, hitting, throwing things, the use of a chain link training collar, ignoring their dog, not providing food or treats, or isolation in a room, crate, or kennel. This does not imply that all of these forms of reward and correction are acceptable. Only that they are multiple, and that training can be successful under some of these circumstances. So it is with electronic training.

One of the greatest acknowledged advantages of electronic training is that sophisticated electronics do make us humans more predictable. It enhances human consistency, especially as it relates to correction. It also allows humans to easily and conveniently apply appropriate corrections, even when a dog is not within range of traditional (leash and choker collar) correction techniques.

Rules of electronic training

As was mentioned earlier, electronic training operates on the same basic principles used in all canine behavior modification: correction, redirection, and reward. Therefore, it is imperative that the dog understands the basics before more sophisticated training begins.

'Dummy Equipment Effect': Before electronic training begins, the owner/trainer needs to be comfortable in the use of the device, and the dog needs to be comfortable, as well. Thus it is very important to create the 'Dummy Equipment Effect' before beginning.

Dogs are highly intelligent and certainly smart enough to know the difference between the different types of collars being used. They look different. They smell different. They exert different pressures on the neck once they are applied. Even the owner/trainer acts differently with the different collars. In some cases, the owner/trainer is there; in other cases, he is not.

Because all of this is true, it is important to eliminate the equipment itself from the learning process. Here is how.

Before beginning to train with an active electronic collar, the dog should first become accustomed to a deactivated collar (i.e., take the battery out). Even if the dog trainer or dog owner is under pressure to train the dog quickly (e.g., the neighbors are complaining), he still needs to teach the dog that the collar is not something to be feared.

The last thing someone wants to see is the dog cowering when it is being approached with a training collar, electronic or otherwise. By spending just a few days introducing the dog to the collar, other problems can be prevented.

Perhaps the one most essential general rule is to work on only one behavior at a time.

General Rules: All of the general rules of obedience training apply to electronic training as well. In fact, they are probably even more important in electronic training. These guidelines include:

Do not train the dog for extended periods of time.

Limit the number of corrections the dog receives in one training session and in one training day.

Be sure that corrections are properly balanced with reward.

Always give the correction at the same time. That is, do so only when the dog is actually misbehaving, not before the misbehavior occurs or after the misbehavior has stopped. This is important because it gives the dog a chance to learn, (i.e., to understand what causes the correction in the first place).

Finally, the beginning point of most electronic training includes the use of a leash, which serves to help redirect the dog away from escape and other inappropriate responses. This, in turn, makes it increasingly important not to correct arbitrarily or out of frustration. As a dog trainer or owner, it is necessary to be as disciplined as you want the dog to be.

The importance of redirection and reward

Electronic training combines several different techniques. Applying a correction is only a small part of a training program. Redirection and praise are far more important.

Why is this methodology important? Suppose there is a dog in a containment system, but every day he charges away and barks at a jogger who is running along outside the established bounds. What should be the desired correction? He should come when he is called, stay in the yard, and stop barking at the jogger. But chasing and barking are perfectly normal in a dog's natural environment. Only in the human environment are they inappropriate.

Therefore, if the owner/trainer really wants to train the dog under these circumstances, he must first correct at the appropriate time, and consistently. He would do so using an obedience command. So, before beginning more complicated electronic training, it is important that the dog understand basic obedience commands. The trainer/owner must build from a solid foundation provided by these training basics.

In this specific instance, as soon as the dog takes off running, he would be given the 'Come' command. That way, when applying correction, it is because the dog did not come on command, not because he is chasing a jogger. Conversely, when the dog does obey immediately, he is praised for responding to the command, not for breaking off his pursuit. This is called redirection.

The risks in electronic training are the many variables. This same situation, handled improperly, can have the opposite effect. It could train the dog to attack joggers. A correction at the wrong time may cause the dog to identify the correction stimulus with the jogger. Dogs are known to have fight or flight responses to such threats. If the dog's response is to 'fight,' joggers beware!

Reward: Unfortunately, some dog trainers/owners put the emphasis on correction. Even in this article, the information is weighted in this area. This is because correction is the area where most training problems occur. Reward is a much easier concept to understand and apply. During training, the dog should constantly and consistently be given a deserved reward - preferably praise and petting - for behavior that meets his training objectives. Again, timing is critical. The dog must be able to make the connection between the reward and the appropriate behavior.

Gratuitous reward is also a no-no. The dog trainer must reward the dog only when he is behaving properly. Do not worry, there will be plenty of opportunities to do so. Unless, of course, the dog trainer/owner slacks off and chooses to reward inconsistently; or he breaks down further and treats the dog to praise, petting, and food, even if a behavior is inappropriate.

Emotional and energy outlet: Appropriate emotional outlets also bear some discussion in this context. Obviously, electronic training is designed to stop a dog from exhibiting misbehaviors, and help reward him for what the dog trainer/owner considers appropriate behavior. But if a dog cannot leave the yard, no reward can replace the freedom he has lost. In such cases, a dog must be given other appropriate outlets. This is why activities like running with the dog, or playing with him, are extremely important.

Redirection: Redirection is equally important, if not more so. In many electronic training situations, the dog trainer/owner needs to provide an alternate behavior for the dog. This redirection provides a known behavior pattern that the dog can fall back on, enabling the dog trainer/owner to reward him. A good example of such a behavior pattern is the 'Sit,' 'Get your ball,' or other command the dog already understands.

Have a plan: Overall, what one tries to do with redirection and reward is build better behavior in the dog. But when building anything, it is useful to have a blueprint - a plan that outlines specifically what to do under an array of circumstances.

Because of all the variables involved with electronic training, the dog trainer/owner needs to have such a plan. He needs to know exactly what he is going to do before a situation arises. Because, when it comes to training dogs, he needs to expect the unexpected. But if there is a plan in place, he will know exactly what to do.

The best plans are the simplest - the ones that ask the dog to do something basic. Pick something the dog has done many times before; perhaps a 'Sit' and 'Stay' command. Reliance on an old habit can bring a misbehaving dog - even a frightened or frazzled dog - back into the comfort zone. This will enable the dog trainer/owner to reward the dog, or regroup, should this become necessary.