

Using Aversives to Modify Your Dog's Behavior



If there's any truth to the saying "idle hands are the Devil's playground", then the same can certainly be said for idle paws. If you're afraid to leave your dog alone for more than a few minutes for fear of what you'll return to, try using devices called "Aversives" to discourage your dog from taking a particular action or entering an area that's off-limits.

Aversives are tools and techniques that can be used to keep dogs away from particular places or to stop them from engaging in certain behaviors.

Finding the right aversive for the objective at hand is often a case of trial and error, as some dogs are immune to a little soaking from a squirt bottle, and others might think that by shaking a can full of pennies, you're telling them it's treat time.

And remember that even after you've found the best method to discourage a dog from a particular action or place, the approach will seldom work effectively unless you offer a *positive* alternative that is both convenient and rewarding.

What are some typical Aversives used by dog caregivers?

Here's a rundown of some common deterrents, each of which will have varying degrees of success depending on the objectives and the dog.

Textures

One great way to keep your dog away from certain areas is to surround (or cover) the area with materials that make your dog's paws uncomfortable.

Indoors, try shelf paper (sticky side up) or double-sided carpet tape. Heavy *plastic* carpet runner (pointed side up) can also be used effectively in some situations. You may need to weight the material firmly or tape it down to ensure it stays put. To protect furniture or floor finishes from sticky substances, attach the aversive to a piece of foil or heavy plastic and secure that with weights or light tape.

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Outdoors, try irregularly shaped rocks, or chicken wire firmly set into the ground, sharp edges rolled under.

These tools are more effective for puppies, small dogs, and low-energy dogs than for those who won't let a little obstacle stand in their way.

Tastes

Because most dogs do much of their investigative work (and much of their damage) with their mouths, anything displeasing to the taste buds will often work quite well. Some of the following substances may damage furniture or floor finishes, however, so be sure to test them in a hidden location before widespread use.

- Bitter Apple® or similar sprays and gels marked specifically for taste aversion.
- Insect repellants, especially those containing citronella or citrus odors (check toxicity- if it's safe for young children, it's generally safe for pets).
- Some muscle rubs.
- Citrus, such as a "from concentrated" juice or fresh peels.
- Aloe gel.

Human-Controlled Aversives

Some items can be used to distract your dog and thereby interrupt his unwanted behavior. Such devices are not meant to terrify your dog, but to provide a brief distraction. It's best if your dog does not perceive the distraction as coming from you. In the instant your dog's attention is focused on the distracting action, redirect his behavior to an appropriate object, and then give him lots of praise. Some effective Aversives that you control include:

- Spray bottle or squirt gun filled with water or a combination of water and vinegar. (*NOTE: avoid high-powered water guns that have a very forceful spray*).
- Loud air horn.
- Whistle.
- Shaker can (soda can filled with nails, pennies, beans, or pebbles- then securely taped shut).

Surprise! Remote-Controlled Aversives

Sometimes the best approach for teaching an animal is to work from a distance. If every aversive is delivered when you're in the room, your dog may quickly learn to refrain from engaging in undesirable behaviors when you're around, but engage in those behaviors as soon as you walk out the door. A few good approaches include:

- Motion detectors that react with a startling sound.
- Snappy trainer (an upside-down mouse trap that's securely taped under to avoid injury).
- Aluminum pie plate containing water, beans, or pebbles- preferably balanced precariously in a restricted area.
- ScatMat® which delivers a very slight electric shock.

Please note: for fearful dogs, try everything else before trying surprise techniques, especially those using noises!