

## 8 RULES THAT EXPLAIN WHY YOU SHOULDN'T TRAIN YOUR DOG USING A SPRAY BOTTLE

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Most dogs have annoying habits, and we humans want to stop them as quickly as possible. Some humans have a little handheld tool

they use to stop behaviours they don't like: a spray bottle. It's cheap, easy to get, and shouldn't really hurt the dog, right? Well, not in my opinion.

In terms of behavioural training, the technical definition of a punishment is something that makes a behaviour less likely to reoccur. In order to be effective, a punishment must follow certain rules. One of my favorite trainers, Steve White, has outlined eight rules for effective punishments.

Let's examine the spray bottle technique from the point of view of these rules.

### **Rule #1:**

*The punishment must be something the animal dislikes and does not expect.*

I can think of several dogs who would just love a spray of water in their face! It wouldn't be much of punishment for them. And making the punishment something the dog doesn't expect is so important. That's where I lucked out. When I used a spray bottle, I stalked my puppy and managed to surprise her as she was grabbing our curtains with her teeth. I also had to keep the spray bottle handy so I could grab it without her noticing. Pretty exhausting and



challenging work! Plus I had to ensure she had no previous associations with the bottle. The first few times it worked fine, but when she started to chew other items, she quickly caught on and only backed off if she sensed the spray bottle.

### **Rule #2:**

*The punishment must suppress the behaviour, or it risks becoming just plain abuse.*

Even a spray of water can easily become abusive. We cannot choose what a dog finds punishing or reinforcing, particularly with self-reinforcing behaviours like barking or jumping on people. The water may be a little annoying, but jumping on visitors may definitely be worth a few squirts in the face! However, we may keep using the punishment because pressing that lever on the bottle and seeing any kind of a reaction in the dog is rewarding for us.

### **Rule #3:**

*The punishment must be of the perfect intensity. Too much and you'll end up hurting your relationship with the animal. Too little and it will only serve to desensitize the animal and build resistance.*

What happens with too strong a punishment? If you spray a sensitive

dog, he may become fearful of water or any kind of bottle. Bath times and any medical procedures involving a bottle will then become battles. If the punishment occurs when your dog is greeting a specific visitor, you may get a fearful response from your dog every time that friend comes over.

What if you play it "safe" and just spray the dog a little? It won't solve the problem behaviour if it's just a little annoying. Also, we are not able to experience the spray of water the way the dog does, so gauging the intensity is very difficult.

### **Rule #4:**

*The punishment must happen immediately, otherwise the dog will not make a clear association between the undesirable behaviour and the punishment.*

You need superfast reflexes to use punishments! If you're just a second or two late, the dog may associate the punishment with something completely different. For example, if you spray while the dog is looking out the window at the neighbor, the dog may think the neighbor produces the evil spray. The next time he sees the neighbor he may bark frantically.

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