



Electronic training devices

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Key facts...

- ★ The RSPCA strongly opposes the use of electronic training devices (which includes containment fencing systems) to train and control dogs and cats.
- ★ Electronic training devices (ETDs) deliver an electric pulse to suppress unwanted behaviour.
- ★ Training animals using techniques which apply aversive stimuli to suppress unwanted behaviour carries a number of risks to welfare.
- ★ There is evidence which shows that the application of an electric stimulus can cause both physiological and behavioural responses associated with pain, fear and stress.
- ★ Defra funded research exploring the welfare impact of manually operated training devices shows that, at least in a proportion of animals trained by an operator using an ETD, there is a negative impact on welfare.
- ★ The RSPCA believes there is no place for such training devices in modern day animal training and we strongly believe that their sale and use for training and controlling cats and dogs should be prohibited.
- ★ We believe the Government in Westminster should follow the lead of the Welsh Government and prohibit their use and the Scottish Government's recent commitment to introduce a ban.
- ★ While the RSPCA does not support electronic livestock fencing it is not against livestock fencing when used appropriately and when correctly managed.

What are Electronic Training Devices?

Electronic training devices (ETDs) deliver an electric pulse to suppress unwanted behaviour. They work on the principle of positive punishment: applying an aversive stimulus to inhibit behaviour and are also referred to as aversive or punitive training techniques.

There are a number of different types of ETDs including those operated manually using a remote controlled transmitter e.g. when a dog is displaying undesirable behaviour; operated automatically eg. when the dog barks or activated at a boundary line e.g. to stop a dog/cat from escaping.

A recent RSPCA survey found that 5% of respondents reported using an electric shock collar to train their dog¹. This is comparable to findings from a scientific study by Blackwell et al in 2012².

The impact of electronic training devices on welfare

There is evidence which shows that the application of an electric stimulus can cause both a physiological stress response³ and both short term and long term behavioural responses associated with pain, fear and

¹ Being #DogKind. How in tune are we with the needs of our canine companions. <https://www.rspca.org.uk/adviceandwelfare/pets/dogs>. (accessed 07.03.18)

² Blackwell, E.J., Bolster, C., Richards, G., Loftus, B.A., Casey, R.A. (2012). The use of electronic collars for training domestic dogs: estimated prevalence, reasons and risk factors for use, and owner perceived success as compared to other training methods. Blackwell EJ, Bolster C, Richards G, Loftus BA, Casey RA. The use of electronic collars for training domestic dogs: estimated prevalence, reasons and risk factors for use, and owner perceived success as compared to other training methods. BMC Veterinary Research. 2012;8:93. doi:10.1186/1746-6148-8-93.

³ Shalke, E., Stichnoth, J., and Jones-Baade, R. (2007) Clinical signs caused by the use of electric training collars on dogs in everyday life situations. Applied Animal Behaviour Science. 105: 369-80.

stress⁴.

Defra funded research exploring the welfare impact of manually operated training devices shows that, at least in a proportion of animals trained by an operator using an ETD, there is a negative impact on welfare. Furthermore, the use of ETDs does negatively impact on the welfare of some dogs when trained even when the training is being carried out by professional trainers using protocols based on advised best practice⁵.

Practical experience gained by members of the Association of Pet Behaviour Counsellors (APBC) shows that ETDs can compromise welfare and in some cases can result in other behaviour problems not previously present, e.g. aggression⁶. A number of scientific studies have found an association between the use of aversive training techniques and the occurrence of undesired behaviour in dogs⁷.

There is also the risk of associating or pairing the pain of the shock with other persons, animals, objects or events that were present at the time of the shock but of no relevance to the dog's behaviour. In the case of aggressive behaviour, because electric shocks can increase this behaviour, it is possible for the owner, another dog or young child to become the target of unexpected aggression⁸. This not only places the relationship between dog and owner at risk but there is also the potential for public safety to be at risk. In contrast, it is also possible for the dog not to link the shock to anything which is confusing and can result in generalised anxiety⁹.

Electronic containment fences may be effective at keeping an animal within a boundary but unlike physical fences they are ineffective at keeping other animals out. This can place cats and dogs in very vulnerable positions especially if they are unable to escape. Some cats and dogs may be so frightened that the level of shock is insufficient to stop them from leaving the area but they may later be unable to return to their home.

Electronic training device stimulus strength

It is suggested by some that the stimulus given by such a collar is similar to the 'nip' given by an adult to its offspring in the wild and terms such as vibration, tingle and stimulation are often associated with these types of devices. However, in order for the shock to suppress the unwanted behaviour it does have to be unpleasant enough to the animal but it is difficult to predict the level of shock delivered to a dog or cat. Furthermore, the experience of the shock, in dogs, for example, will be affected by temperament, previous experiences, frequency of application, location of shock, thickness of hair and the level of moisture on the skin¹⁰. Thus even if the collar was set to deliver a stimulus believed to be similar to that of a nip or tingle it may in fact cause more pain than intended and can result in a high end shock being delivered which far exceeds the level at which the shock is aversive to the animal. This can result in physical trauma. Indeed,

⁴ Beerda, B., Schilder, M.B.H., van Hoof, J.A.R.A.M., de Vries, H.W. and Mol, J.A. (1998) Behavioural, saliva cortisol and heart rate responses to different types of stimuli in dogs. *Applied Animal Behaviour Science* 59, 365-381. Schilder, M., van der Borg, J., (2004) Training dogs with help of the shock collar: short and long term behavioural effects. *Applied Animal Behaviour science*. 85: 319-34.

⁵ Cooper, J.J., Cracknell, N. Hardiman, J., Wright, H., Mills, D. (2014) The welfare consequences and efficacy of training pet dogs with remote electronic collars in comparison to reward based training. *PLoS ONE* 9(9): e102722. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0102722

⁶ www.apbc.org.uk/node/353 (accessed 6th March 2018).

⁷ Hiby, E.F., Rooney, N.J., Bradshaw, J.W.S., (2004). Dog training methods: their use, effectiveness and interaction with behaviour and welfare. *Anim. Welf.* 13, 63-69. -Herron, M.E., Schofer, F.S., and Resner, I.R., (2009). Survey of the use and outcome of confrontational and non-confrontational training methods in client-owned dogs showing undesired behaviors. *Appl. Anim. Beh. Sci.* 117, 47-54. -Blackwell, E.J., Twells, C. Seawright, A., Casey, R.A., (2008). The relationship between training methods and the occurrence of behaviour problems, as reported by owners, in a population of domestic dogs. *Journal of Veterinary Behavior: Clinical Applications and Research*. 3, 207-217.

⁸ Resner, I. (2017). The learning dog: A discussion of training methods. In Serpell, J, (ed) *The Domestic Dog. Its Evolution, Behavior and Interactions with People*. Cambridge University Press. London.

⁹ <http://www.apbc.org.uk/articles/shockcollars> (accessed 6th March 2018).

¹⁰ Blackwell, E.J., Casey, R.A., (1993) The use of shock collars and their impact on the welfare of dogs: A review of the current literature. Report to the RSPCA.

there are reports of physical lesions on the neck of animals caused by high intensities of shock¹¹ as well as skin irritation¹² or contact necrosis. In some cases, it is necessary to ensure the level of shock is continuously high. For example, when used with containment fences, the shock level has to be sufficiently high to keep the dog within the boundary regardless of what is at the other side¹³.

A study comparing the characteristics of different electronic training collars¹⁴ found large differences between e-collar models in the pulses delivered by the collars meaning that one model cannot simply be swapped with another. Faults were also found within the collars with one delivering stimuli longer than expected and another, a stimulus much greater than expected. The same research group also assessed instruction manuals on a variety of different factors including whether they advised against the use on young and infirm animals; gave advice on avoiding pressure necrosis and the method recommended for selecting the starting stimulus level for each dog¹⁵. Statements referring to use on dogs over a certain age and health status were not always included and varying levels of information on the use of the e-collar in training. Practically this means that ETDs can be misused and may prove ineffective especially if they fail to meet key criteria for positive punishment: immediacy, aversiveness and consistency. Where used by unskilled persons, the aversive nature of these devices and the likelihood of training ineffectiveness, means that their use can be abusive¹⁶.

Legislation and RSPCA policy

Defra's [Code of Practice for the Welfare of Dogs](#) in England specifically states that you should; "*only use positive reward based training. Avoid harsh, potentially painful or frightening training methods.*"

Furthermore, the Welsh Government was convinced of the cruelty and suffering these devices posed and prohibited their use for dogs or cats in Wales in 2010¹⁷. The RSPCA welcomes the Scottish Government's recent commitment to introduce a similar ban¹⁸.

Based on the evidence available, RSPCA policy states that *it is opposed to the use of any training methods, to train and control companion animals and believes that reward based methods should be used instead*¹⁹."

Alternatives to ETDs

Like many other organisations, the RSPCA believes that the use of electronic training devices are not only unacceptable from a welfare perspective, but this type of approach is not necessary for the modification of animal behaviour. Trainers and behaviourists all over the UK use reward-based methods to train and modify animal behaviour very effectively and without subjecting animals to training techniques which may cause pain or distress.

Where electronic training devices are used to contain animals, there are likewise alternative methods which do not rely on painful stimuli. In the case of cats, a popular reason for using an electric fence is to prevent road traffic accidents. RTAs are a significant welfare issue however there are numerous alternatives

¹¹ Seksel, K. (1999) Comments on collars policy: No. Aust Vet Journal 77, 78.

¹² Polsky, R.H. (1994). Electronic shock collars - are they worth the risks? Journal of the American Animal Hospital Association 30 (5) pp 463-468.

¹³ www.apbc.org.uk/node/353 (accessed 6th March 2018).

¹⁴ Llines, J.A., van Driel, K., Cooper, J.J. (2013) The characteristics of electronic training collars for dogs. Veterinary Record doi:10.1136/vr.101144

¹⁵ <http://randd.defra.gov.uk/Default.aspx?Module=More&Location=None&ProjectID=15332>

¹⁶ Ziv, G. (2017). The Effects of Using Aversive Training Methods in Dogs – A Review. Journal of Veterinary Behavior: Clinical Applications and Research (19) 50-60.

¹⁷ Animal Welfare (Electronic Collars) Wales Regulations 2010

¹⁸ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-scotland-politics-42807728> (accessed 21.02.18)

¹⁹ <https://www.rspca.org.uk/whatwedo/howwework/policies>

available such as cat-friendly fencing, restricted access to the outdoors during times where volumes of traffic are high, keeping them in overnight, large enclosures as well as the provision of resources in the garden and home which aim to reduce the cat's need to wander away from home. We are aware of a recent study from the University of Lincoln²⁰ which found no evidence to suggest that the long-term welfare of cats was impaired by electronic garden boundary containment systems. However, the RSPCA remains opposed to the use of such systems. As they are based on the principle of positive punishment, by definition, they must cause a level of pain, fear and distress at least in the short term (during the training period) in order to be effective in teaching the animals not to cross the boundary. Indeed, anecdotal reports suggest that this is the case.

Summary

It is the RSPCA's opinion that the use of such devices pose unnecessary and unacceptable risk to cat and dog welfare and are contrary to the principles of the Animal Welfare Act 2006. There is no place for such training devices in modern day animal training and we strongly believe that their sale and use for training and controlling cats and dogs should be prohibited. Furthermore with Wales and Scotland having either banned or committed to banning their use we believe the UK Government should follow suit and bring in a ban in England.

Additional note: Electric fencing for livestock

While the RSPCA does not support electronic livestock fencing it is not against livestock fencing when used appropriately and when correctly managed. Electric livestock fencing generally follows a visible boundary or is marked with white tape which is not the case for buried or hidden boundary fences and which require the dog or cat to learn the position of a boundary in the absence of any geographic features. Viable alternatives to livestock fencing are not as readily available for livestock as they are for companion animals due to the economic cost of fencing large areas of pasture.

The RSPCA further believes that the probability of livestock leaving a bound area, compared with cats and dogs, is less likely as the welfare needs of livestock can generally be provided for within the area. Dogs are more likely to be strongly motivated to leave an area to gain access to something which it highly values or to avoid something which it is frightened of thus are more likely to try and leave the area and be punished as a consequence.

²⁰ Kasbaoui N, Cooper J, Mills DS, Burman O (2016) Effects of Long-Term Exposure to an Electronic Containment System on the Behaviour and Welfare of Domestic Cats. PLOS ONE 11(9): e0162073. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0162073>