Advisory on the Use of Aversive Dog Training Devices (Electronic Shock and Prong Collars)

Dog Training Standards Workgroup

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Introduction

Preface

This document serves as an advisory on the use of dog training devices, specifically electronic shock and prong collars.

Such training devices have potential to cause serious harm to dogs both physically and mentally, as well as pose a safety risk to humans and other animals if not operated properly. Dog owners should not attempt to use such training devices on their own. Please consult a professional dog trainer listed under the AVS-ACDT Scheme for advice on dog training and use of training devices. It is recommended that a veterinary assessment be performed to rule out any underlying medical condition(s) which may contribute to behavioural issues.

This advisory should be read in relation to the Guidelines for Dog Training and Behaviour Rehabilitation.

Animal Welfare

The Five Domains of Animal Welfare provides a holistic and science-based framework to assess and promote an animal's physical and emotional well-being. This approach considers both negative and positive experiences that arise from physical and functional factors, which affect the overall mental state and welfare of the animal. The Five Domains are:

a) **Nutrition.** The animal should have access to adequate, balanced, and species-appropriate food and water to maintain its health and well-being.

b) **Environment.** The animal should be provided suitable shelter and a safe, comfortable living space that allows it to perform normal behaviours.

c) **Health.** The animal should receive necessary disease prevention, veterinary treatment, and be kept free from injury or illness.

d) **Behavioural Interactions.** The animal should have opportunities to express itself in its interactions with the environment, other animals and

humans. It should also be able to express natural, species-specific behaviours, and be provided mental stimulation.

e) **Mental State.** The animal's subjective experiences should be predominantly positive, minimising distress and promoting contentment and enrichment. This fifth domain also acknowledges that an animal's perception of its environment and experiences—shaped by the interplay of the other four domains—ultimately determines an animal's quality of life.

It is crucial that all training methods and devices used should not cause physical or psychological harm to the dog. Instead, they should promote positive experiences and support the dog's overall welfare.

Training Devices

Training devices are used to facilitate the training of an animal to increase or decrease a behaviour being expressed. The impact of training devices on animals can vary, depending on their type and how they are used, resulting in either positive or adverse effects. Of particular concern are the electronic shock and prong collars, which this advisory will cover.

Electronic Collars

Electronic Collars

- Electronic collars are electronically activated training devices designed to deliver a physical stimulus at a dog's neck, such as an electrical stimulus, vibration, aversive spray, tone, ultrasound, or light.
- They are typically used to suppress unwanted behaviours such as excessive pulling, jumping up on people, lunging, barking; for recall training; or in rarer cases, for training blind or deaf dogs.
- There are various types of electronic collars available on the market. Depending on the model and brand, some collars come with more than one feature (e.g. shock, vibration, spray, tone, ultrasound, or light), so it can be difficult to differentiate the type of electronic collar based on its appearance. Electronic collars are typically operated through a wireless remote or automatically activated through stimulus detection (e.g. barking). The common types of electronic collars are listed below.

- It is strongly advised that rewards-based training be considered first before resorting to the use of electronic collars.

FIGURE 1: EXAMPLE OF AN ELECTRONIC COLLAR

Types of Electronic Collars

Shock Collars

- Electronic shock collars may also be known as electric collars, e-collars (different from Elizabethan collars), remote training collars, barking collars, anti-bark collars, e-stim collars, or stimulation collars. They deliver an electrical impulse through contact points (electrodes) on the dog's neck.
- The collar works when it is well-fitted to the dog as this enables electrical conduction. It may cause discomfort and/or skin irritation if fitted too tightly.
- Modern shock collars have different modes to adjust the intensity and duration of the electrical impulses or 'stimulation'. Some shock collars have an intensity range of 1–100 and a duration of up to 10 seconds.
- Newer shock collars may have a warning system built in, to enable avoidance conditioning. Before giving the shock, these collars might vibrate, make a sound, or flash a light. This warning gives the dog a chance to change their behaviour before getting shocked, similar to how

a parent might raise their voice as a warning to their child before meting out punishment. If the child (or in this case, the dog) stops the behaviour after the warning, they avoid the punishment.

- There are three main ways in which shock collars can be activated:
    - **Remote-controlled collars (RCC)** are activated manually through a wireless remote control.
    - **Bark-activated collars (BAC)** are automatically activated by the dog's barking, through the use of sensors.
    - **Electronic boundary fence collars (EBF)** are activated at a boundary line to keep the dog within a specific area.

Vibration Collars

Vibration collars make use of a mechanism to create a buzzing sensation that can be felt on the skin and may be aversive to a dog.

Spray Collars

Spray collars punish behaviour by emitting an aversive substance at the facial regions of the dog (e.g. citronella liquid, puff of air or noxious scent).

Prong Collars

Prong Collars

- Prong collars (also known as pinch collars) comprise a series of links or segments with prongs, teeth, or blunted open ends turned towards the dog's neck and angled in such a way so that, when the collar is tightened, it pinches the skin around the dog's neck. Plastic tips are sometimes placed on the ends of the prong.
- Prong collars are used by handlers to suppress behaviours such as excessive pulling, jumping on people, or lunging. When pulled, the prong collar around the neck is tightened, causing pain.
- The harder the pull, the greater the pressure on the dog’s neck. It is strongly advised that rewards-based training be considered first before resorting to the use of prong collars.

FIGURE 2: EXAMPLE OF A METAL PRONG COLLAR

FIGURE 3: EXAMPLE OF A PLASTIC PRONG COLLAR

Why Aversive Training Devices Should Not Be Used

Aversive training devices such as shock and prong collars should not be used as there are associated risks with their use, especially if used improperly and without the guidance of a trained professional.

Negative Impact on the Dog's Welfare

- The use of shock collars and prong collars may cause the dog to experience direct distress such as feelings of pain, fear, and anxiety. This is evident through observable stress signals such as low postures, lip licking, paw lifting, vocalising, and increased cortisol levels and heart rates[1].

- Using such collars may create unintended negative feelings in dogs, making them associate fear or stress with their owner, trainer, or the training location, even when the collar is not being used.
- Negative associations with these collars may extend to other situations. There have been reports of dogs showing lasting behavioural changes, even years later, suggesting chronic trauma from these training methods.
- The use of shock collars and prong collars merely suppresses certain behaviours[2], leading to a reduced range of behaviours being displayed by the dog, which is widely viewed by animal welfare experts as an indicator of compromised welfare.
- The use of these collars may also exacerbate and worsen existing behavioural problems, and the dog may revert to the same behaviour once the collar is removed. Instead, owners should focus on addressing the underlying cause of a dog's behavioural problems, such as pain, discomfort, unmet needs, fear, anxiety, or frustration.
- Shock collars can cause physical damage such as skin irritation, pressure wounds[3], and burning due to electrical damage[4]. Prong collars

have the potential to cause physical injuries such as bruises and lacerations.

- Moreover, the use of aversive training devices may compromise and diminish the quality of the dog-owner relationship[5], potentially reducing opportunities for positive and meaningful training and enrichment.

Endangerment of Surrounding People and Animals

- The improper use of shock collars and prong collars can increase the likelihood of aggressive* behaviour becoming a part of a dog's regular behavioural patterns[6], especially since they add more sources of pain and fear for the dog to anticipate and react to.
- Punishing pre-bite signals such as growling, staring, and snapping may teach a dog to skip these warnings and engage in a bite directly[7] as the dog learns that these signals will result in punishment. This creates a

* Behaviours that may be deemed aggressive, such as growling, snapping, are part of the normal behavioural repertoire of a dog and may arise as part of normal communication among dogs and with other species. While such behaviours may appear unprovoked at times, they can arise due to underlying medical or emotional problems and are typically made in response to perceived stressors in the environment, in a specific context.

dangerous situation where the handler, or nearby animal or person cannot anticipate or respond to warning signals to prevent an actual bite.

Other Unintended Consequences from the Improper Use of Aversive Training Devices by Non-Professionals

- The improper use of aversive training devices by non-professionals can result in depressive states such as learned helplessness.
- Learned helplessness occurs when a dog is repeatedly exposed to something unpleasant that cannot be escaped from, causing the dog to give up trying and become passive, unresponsive, and disengaged.
- This is exacerbated when shock collar training is administered by non-professionals due to:
    - **Poor timing in the application of the shock**
    - **Lack of experience in calibrating the appropriate shock level**. If the shock is applied at too high a level, the dog experiences trauma and is unable to learn due to stress. If the

shock is applied at too low a level, habituation occurs and the punisher (which is the shock) is no longer effective, as the dog gets used to it.

- **Inability to accurately read a dog's body language**. Professional experience is an important factor in accurately detecting fear in dogs[8]. Not all owners, especially those who are new in owning dogs or welcoming a new dog into their household, may be as knowledgeable as a certified professional in recognising signs of fear, stress, and anxiety in their dog[9].
- **Inconsistent application of punisher**. Inconsistent application of the punisher in response to specific behaviours can lead to confusion and anxiety in dogs, as the dogs struggle to understand what is expected of them. This inconsistency can undermine training efforts and can worsen behavioural issues, as dogs become uncertain about which actions will result in a punishment.

- **Inappropriate usage leading to abuse**. The use of aversive training devices may seem to quickly (though not permanently) suppress certain behaviours, which may be very reinforcing to the user. This can lead to misuse especially when an owner, driven by anger or frustration, uses the device as a form of punishment rather than training.

Misconceptions About Aversive Training Devices

Despite the negative repercussions of the improper use of shock collars and prong collars, there are still many dog owners and trainers who use them without professional supervision and guidance. The accessibility of these training devices on the market and (mis)information online makes it very easy for anyone to use them on their dog. Their misuse can also be exacerbated by the misconceptions surrounding these training devices.

Myth: Shock collars do not cause pain, merely a tapping sensation when tried on people. Dogs have fur which insulates them against the shock, and their skin is thicker than human skin.

✓ **Fact**: A dog's skin may in fact be more sensitive to shock than human skin as it is thinner. The intensity of shock may also be amplified as a dog's coat keeps it warm, leading to increased humidity and skin conductivity. Even when lower levels of shock are applied, dogs can experience feelings of pain which are evidenced by observable stress signals (such as low postures, lip licking, paw lifting, and vocalising)[10].

✗ Myth: Aversive collars are quick solutions and more effective than positive reinforcement

✓ **Fact**: The welfare implications and risks in using aversive collars far outweigh any effectiveness. Training is a two-way process, and it takes time to build the dog-owner relationship. While some owners may claim that positive reinforcement training is ineffective because it did not work for them, it might be due to incorrect techniques or insufficient time invested. Positive reinforcement training, when done correctly, can be very effective in modifying behaviour[11].

Recommended Approach to Training

Our recommended approach to training is comprehensively explained in the Guidelines for Dog Training and Behaviour Rehabilitation.

Humane Hierarchy and the Least Intrusive, Minimally Aversive (LIMA) Approach

- The Humane Hierarchy (Fig. 4) is a tool that can be used to guide owners and dog training professionals before and/or during training and behaviour modification. Each option should be considered before moving to the next stage in the hierarchy.

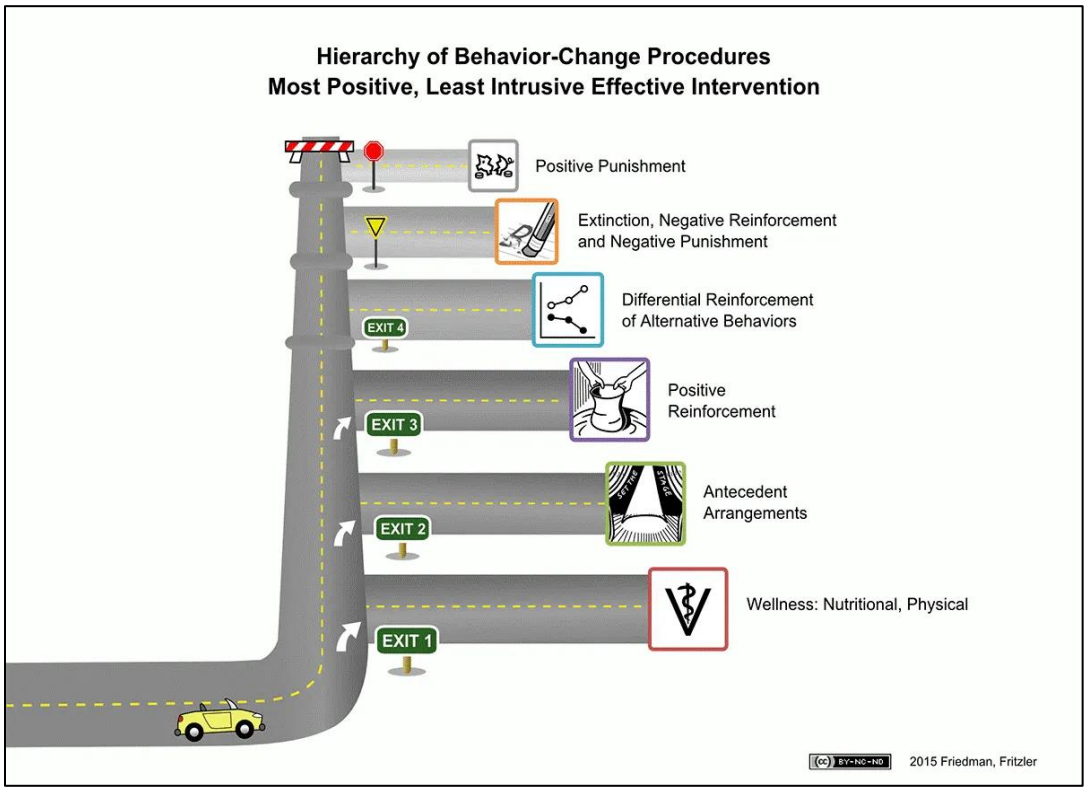

FIGURE 4: THE HIERARCHY OF BEHAVIOUR CHANGE PROCEDURES INDICATING THE LEAST INTRUSIVE, MINIMALLY AVERSIVE METHOD STARTING FROM THE BOTTOM (EXIT 1) TO THE MOST UNDESIRED METHOD AT THE TOP (STOP SIGN).

- Using the Humane Hierarchy as a guide, all other options must be exhausted before considering more aversive training methods such as the use of shock and prong collars. Rewards-based methods have proven to be just as or more effective in training the same behaviours, without the associated risks[12].

- If a shock or prong collar must be used, it should only be used as a last resort, under the close guidance of a professional dog trainer listed under the AVS-ACDT Scheme. This should be accompanied with education for the dog owner on proper use and management of the device (e.g. consider their dog's age, health condition, and size in determining the feasibility of using such devices).
- Dog owners are encouraged to have thorough discussions with their dog trainer. This should include a holistic plan that extends beyond sessions with the trainer to include socialisation at home, device specifications, frequency of usage, and contingencies to address any fallout from using the devices. The trainer should work closely with veterinarians to explore behaviour-modifying drugs as an option, if appropriate.
- It is strongly recommended that a thorough veterinary assessment be done before and after the use of such training devices to minimise health risks.

Conclusion

The use of shock collars and prong collars in dog training is strongly discouraged as they have the potential to cause serious negative consequences. Such devices should be avoided unless other less aversive training methods have failed, and they must only be used as a last resort. They should only be used under the close supervision and guidance of a professional dog trainer listed under the AVS-ACDT Scheme. Dog owners using these devices should also be educated on the proper use of the device and on recognising stress signals in dog behaviour.

Handlers who misuse the shock or prong collar may be charged under Part 4 of the Animals & Birds Act (Animal Welfare and Prevention of Cruelty to Animals). If you are a witness to any suspected acts of animal abuse or cruelty, please contact:

- AVS' 24-hour helpline at **1800 476 1600** and
- SPCA's 24-hour hotline at **6287 5355 Ext. 9**

Position Statements from Professional Organisations

- A list of position statements and codes of practices from international organisations on the use of dog training devices and training methods are listed (below). Readers may find them helpful in gaining perspective about dog training devices.

American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA)

- Position Statement on Training Aids and Methods[13]

American Veterinary Society of Animal Behaviour (AVSAB)

- Position Statement on Humane Dog Training[14]

Australia Veterinary Association (AVA)

- Use of Behaviour-Modifying Collars on Dogs[15]

European Society of Veterinary Clinical Ethology (ESVCE)

- Position Statement on Electronic Training Devices[16]

Glossary

Avoidance Conditioning: The animal learns to perform a behaviour to prevent an aversive consequence.

Elizabethan Collar: A protective, cone-shaped medical device worn around an animal's neck to prevent it from reaching wounds, surgical sites, or injuries during the healing process.

Learned Helplessness: Occurs when an animal continuously faces a negative, uncontrollable situation and stops trying to change their circumstances, even when they can do so.

Habituation: The diminishing of an innate response to a frequently repeated stimulus.

Recall Training: The process of training a dog to return to their handler when called.

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Appendix

Contributor List

Dr Audrey Chen	Chairperson
Ms Aarthi Sankar	Chairperson
Ms Angie Tan	Dog Trainer
Ms Anna Koo	Dog Trainer
Ms Chong Qiai	Dog Trainer
Ms Christine Ho	Dog Trainer
Mr Jeffery Ong	Dog Trainer
Mr Owen Sim	Dog Trainer
Ms Vivien Chin	Dog Trainer
Dr Daphne Ang	Veterinarian
Dr Kenneth Tong	Veterinarian
Dr Teo Boon Han	Veterinarian
Dr Xutian Liang	Veterinarian
Ms Kieran Kua	AVS Rehoming Partner
Mr Ricky Yeo	AVS Rehoming Partner
Mr Samuel Lim	AVS Rehoming Partner
Mr Derwin Kang	Military / Working Dog Unit
Mr Joel Ee	Military / Working Dog Unit
Mr Kelvyn Vernon Owen Richard	Military / Working Dog Unit
Ms Samantha Tan	Military / Working Dog Unit