



Electronic training devices

RSPCA POSITION STATEMENT

Key facts...

- ★ The RSPCA strongly opposes the use of electronic training devices (e.g. collars and boundary fences) 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 does carry a number of risks.
- ★ 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.
- ★ Recent 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.
- ★ 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 training techniques.

There are a number of different types including those operated manually via a remote-controlled transmitter which are generally used to deliver shocks (from a collar worn by the animal) to suppress a wide range of behaviour problems including aggression and predatory behaviour and those which are activated at a boundary line and deliver a shock to prevent dogs and cats from leaving a defined area.

ETDs and welfare

Training animals using techniques which apply aversive stimuli to suppress unwanted behaviour does carry a number of risks, and for dogs these include:

- Increasing the dog's fear or anxiety about the situation in which it is used
- Decreasing the dog's ability to learn
- Associating other coincidental events with a fear provoking event
- Inhibiting behaviour, but leaving the underlying emotional response unchanged increasing the chance of future problems
- Causing confusion as to which behaviour is required and
- Causing physical injury¹.

With regard to ETDs, there is evidence which shows that the application of an electric stimulus can cause both a physiological stress response² and behavioural responses associated with pain, fear and stress³.

¹ www.dogwelfarecampaign.org.uk Accessed 20th January 2014.

² Shalke, E., Stichnoth, J., and Jones-Baade, R. (2005) Stress symptoms caused by the use of electric training collars on dogs (canis familiaris) in everyday life situations. Current Issues and Research in Veterinary Behavioural Medicine: Papers presented at the 5th International Veterinary Behaviour meeting. Purdue University Press, West Lafayette, Indiana.

Although 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, the experience of the shock, in dogs for example, will be affected by the dog’s temperament, previous experiences, frequency of application, location of shock, thickness of hair and the level of moisture on the skin⁴. Thus even if the collar was set to deliver a stimulus believed to be similar to that of a ‘nip’ it may in fact cause more pain than intended.

Recent 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 welfare⁵. 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 practice⁶.

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. aggression⁷. A number of scientific studies have found an association between the use of aversive training techniques and the occurrence of undesired behaviour in dogs⁸.

ETDs can pose health risks; there have been reports of physical lesions on the neck of animals caused by high intensities of shock⁹ as well as skin irritation¹⁰ or contact necrosis.

There is also great potential for misuse of these devices, either through ignorance or malice by those intent on deliberate cruelty. The intensity and duration of the shock can be altered by the user which can result in a high end shock being delivered which far exceeds the level at which the shock is aversive to the animal.

RSPCA policy and position and legislation

The RSPCA’s position is underpinned by our policy which states that “*the RSPCA believes that no technical device should be used or offered for sale where an animal can be subjected to a painful stimulus at the direct instigation of a human or where a painful stimulus is delivered as a result of an animal’s action from which it cannot retreat.*”

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 2010¹¹.

Alternatives to ETDs

Like many other organisations (see [Dog Welfare Campaign website](#)), the RSPCA believes that the use of

³ Tortora, D.F.. (a982) Understanding Electronic Dog Training Part 1. Canine Practice 9 (2), 17-22. 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

⁴ 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.

⁵ Cooper, J., Wright, H., Mills, D., Casey, R., Blackwell, E., Van Driel, K., Lines. (2013) Studies to assess the effect of pet training aids, specifically remote static pulse systems on the welfare of domestic dogs. Report to Defra.

⁶ Cooper, J., Cracknell, N., Hardiman, J., Mills, D., (2013) Studies to assess the effect of pet training aids, specifically remote static pulse systems on the welfare of domestic dogs; field study of dogs in training. Report to Defra.

⁷ www.apbc.org.uk/node/353

⁸ 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 Resiner, 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.

⁹ Seksel, K. (1999)10 Comments on collars policy: No. *Aust Vet Journal* 77, 78.

¹⁰ Polsky, R.H. 1994. Electronic shock collars - are they worth the risks? *Journal of the American Animal Hospital Association* 30 (5) pp 463-468.

¹¹ Animal Welfare (Electronic Collars) Wales Regulations 2010

aversive training techniques, which include ETDs, is not only unacceptable from a welfare perspective, but that this type of approach is not necessary for the modification of animal behaviour. Trainers all over the UK use reward-based methods to train animals very effectively and without subjecting animals to training techniques which may cause pain or distress.

The RSPCA recognises that electronic boundary fences are most likely to be used to contain cats within an area to prevent fatal road accidents which we acknowledge are a significant welfare problem. However, the use of electronic boundary fences are likely to have a negative impact on the welfare and behaviour of cats and the RSPCA believes that owners should consider all viable alternatives such as fencing or the construction of a large enclosure. Expert opinion suggests that keeping cats in at night is a good preventative measure for protecting cats from fatal road traffic accidents.

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.

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.