



Certification Council for
Professional Dog Trainers®

Position Statement on Behavior Change Procedures in Dog Training

Our Position

The Certification Council for Professional Dog Trainers® (CCPDT®) endorses reinforcement-based training strategies as the primary method for modifying behavior, reducing fear and aggression, and fostering positive relationships between dogs, their owners or caretakers, and the community.

Our standards are guided by scientific research, practical effectiveness, and ethical responsibility, ensuring that credentialed trainers are equipped to serve with skill and integrity. We prioritize practical, outcome-driven approaches continuously informed by evolving science and real-world experience, bridging the gap between academic theory and practical application. We oppose the use of behavioral intervention strategies and training equipment that cause physical harm, induce prolonged stress, or lead to chronic anxiety from sustained fear.

Our standards promote effective, ethical, and humane training methods while addressing behavioral challenges with measurable, evidence-based practices. Through these standards, the CCPDT seeks to advance the field of dog training and behavior consulting while balancing community safety, dog welfare, and professional competence.

Glossary

As used in this statement and throughout CCPDT policies, positions, and practices, the following definitions are applied:

- **Agency:** The ability to exert control and overcome challenges in one's environment to gather knowledge and enhance skills for future use.
- **Aversive:** Any stimulus, including training equipment, behavioral intervention strategies, or environmental factors, the dog seeks to avoid or escape.
- **Certification Period:** The time when a CCPDT certificant's credentials are valid, starting from the award date and ending on the expiration date, unless renewed.
- **Choice:** the act of choosing or selecting from more than one desirable alternative.
- **Collaborative Team:** A certified or licensed dog trainer or behavior consultant, veterinarian, veterinary behaviorist, or other specialists who collaborate to guide training decisions.
- **Conditioning Process:** Preparing dogs and their owners or caretakers to use training equipment safely and effectively by systematically introducing the equipment to teach the dog how to avoid aversive elements.
- **Control:** the ability to predictably and effectively produce desired results in a given situation.
- **Dog Behavior Consultant:** A dog behavior consultant is a dog trainer with advanced expertise in behavior modification who specializes in resolving behavioral problems, including aggression, fear, phobias, and anxiety.
- **Dog Trainer:** A dog trainer teaches dogs fundamental skills and desirable behaviors, addresses common behavioral challenges, and helps owners or caretakers implement strategies to prevent and

manage undesired behaviors. Trainers may also specialize in preparing dogs for specific roles, such as service work, therapy, sports, or other specialized tasks.

- **Prolonged Exposure:** Extended or continuous exposure to a specific stimulus or situation over an extended period, leading to distress.
- **Punishment-Based Training Strategy:** a dog training or behavioral intervention strategy intended to decrease an undesired behavior by primarily using positive punishment.
- **Qualified Professional:** certified or licensed dog trainer, behavior consultant, veterinarian, veterinary behaviorist, or other educated specialist.
- **Reinforcement-Based Training Strategy:** a dog training or behavioral intervention strategy intended to increase a desired behavior or change the dog's emotional response to a situation by primarily using positive reinforcement.
- **Training Equipment:** Any tools, devices, or apparatus used to assist in teaching, managing, or modifying a dog's behavior. This includes items designed to facilitate communication, reinforce desired behaviors, ensure safety, or prevent undesired behaviors during training sessions. Examples include harnesses, head collars, martingale collars, muzzles, prong collars, slip collars, and electronic training collars.
- **Well-being:** A state of being comfortable, happy, and healthy.

The Hierarchy of Behavior Change Procedures

When implementing behavior change plans, certificants must follow a structured, ethical decision-making process. The Hierarchy of Behavior Change Procedures, developed by Dr. Susan Friedman, PhD, provides a step-by-step framework that prioritizes the least intrusive, effective interventions before considering more restrictive measures.

The Hierarchy serves as an ethical safeguard, requiring certificants to initiate any behavior change plan by addressing physical health, antecedent arrangement, and environmental management to prevent the rehearsal of undesired behaviors. They must focus on positive reinforcement strategies that encourage desired behaviors or improve the dog's emotional response to a situation, prompting trainers to prioritize the most humane and effective strategy based on each case. By following this framework, trainers avoid punishment-based strategies unless all reinforcement-based options have been exhausted, and an evidence-based justification exists for their use.

In most cases, desired behavior change can be achieved by effectively managing the dog's environment, meeting physical health and exercise needs, and using non-aversive operant and classical conditioning. These techniques teach foundational skills, train alternative behaviors, and use desensitization and counterconditioning to modify the dogs' behavior. The Hierarchy explicitly discourages using punishment-based training strategies for convenience, personal preference, or as an initial step in training or behavior change plans.

Adhering to the Hierarchy requires a high level of competency and education. Certificants must be skilled in maximizing reinforcement-based strategies, minimizing reliance on punishment-based methods, and avoiding the use of aversive equipment - all while delivering effective training solutions that uphold professional standards.

Ethical Considerations in Behavior Change Plans

The training strategies used by dog trainers and behavior consultants play a pivotal role in shaping dogs' immediate and long-term behavioral and emotional responses. The CCPDT advocates for reinforcement-based training strategies as they are associated with reduced instances of aggression, emotional conflict, avoidance, and fear. These strategies should be the primary approach for teaching new skills and behaviors and forming a solid foundation for advanced training.

Certificants must remain aware of potentially aversive elements in their behavior change plans, including unintended consequences or management protocols that may impact the dog's well-being. Management

strategies that significantly limit a dog's agency or behavioral repertoire should be avoided whenever possible, opting for less intrusive antecedent arrangements that promote choice and control. All behavior change plans must be continuously assessed for risk, necessity, and effectiveness.

Certificants must prioritize the safety and well-being of the community, followed by the best interests of their clients, while striving to meet dogs' needs and enhance their overall well-being. This commitment includes maximizing the use of reinforcement-based training strategies, minimizing reliance on punishment-based methods, and ensuring no harm is done. In all cases, decision-making should be guided by the ethical principles outlined in the CCPDT Standards of Practice and Code of Ethics, ensuring adherence to both its letter and spirit.

Additionally, the CCPDT emphasizes the importance of tailoring behavior change plans to align with the needs and capacities of a dog's owner or caretaker. Achieving positive welfare outcomes often hinges on creating practical, minimally intrusive strategies that are feasible for human clients to implement effectively.

Respecting Methodological Diversity in Dog Training

The CCPDT acknowledges the significance of understanding the strengths and limitations of different dog training methodologies. It also recognizes that opinions regarding the use of punishment-based training strategies and certain types of training equipment differ within the professional community.

We acknowledge that evidence indicates that reinforcement-based training methods are effective in most instances. However, as an organization dedicated to evidence-based training practices, we must recognize the utility of negative reinforcement and positive punishment in specific situations, toward realizing an overall benefit to welfare.

We strive to provide evidence-based and practical guidance to dog training professionals working across various practice areas. Therefore, when developing a behavior change plan, CCPDT certificants must take the following steps before escalating a behavior change plan to add more restrictive measures:

- Follow a thorough evaluation of the Hierarchy of Behavior Change Procedures for each dog and owner or caretaker with whom they work.
- Consideration of the dog's breed, age, health, home environment, past reinforcement history, community safety, and the owner or caretaker's knowledge, skills, abilities, and limitations.
- Advise only on cases within their competencies, experience, and certification.
- Consult with qualified professionals when dealing with challenging cases.

The Use of Training Equipment

We acknowledge that dog owners and caretakers may require the support of training equipment to manage undesired behaviors. While such equipment can be helpful in temporarily managing undesired behavior, it should not be a substitute for comprehensive training. Training equipment or punishment-based training strategies should only be considered when their application clearly and measurably outweighs the risks. Compliance issues, unrealistic training goals, or personal preferences are not justifications for unnecessary pressure or equipment that may cause emotional distress to dogs.

When selecting training equipment and behavior intervention strategies, certificants must:

- Prioritize equipment that minimizes harm and considers the dog's physical and emotional well-being.
- Follow a comprehensive conditioning process to ensure the dog and the owner or caretaker understand how to use training equipment safely and effectively.
- Document why the equipment is being used and for how long.

- Regularly assess the dog's emotional response and behavior to determine whether the equipment remains appropriate or necessary.
- Develop a plan to reduce reliance on training equipment when the dog can be safely managed in real-world settings.

Criteria for Considering Punishment-Based Training Strategies

- Utilization of punishment-based strategies is only considered when the potential harm from not using such methods (e.g., escalation of undesired behavior) exceeds any risks associated with their use.
- Evidence must demonstrate that less intrusive methods cannot achieve the desired outcomes. This requires documented attempts using the Hierarchy of Behavior Change Procedures, with data collected at each step.
- Punishment-based strategies should only be employed if management strategies are assessed and determined to pose more significant risks than the training intervention itself.
- Punishment-based strategies may be employed only when safety or well-being concerns for the dog or others are present and documented.

Implementation and Education about Training Equipment and Punishment

- Trainers must be trained and proficient in using training equipment and punishment-based techniques before implementation.
- Trainers must educate the dog's owner or caretaker about the intended use, alternative options, potential risks, and expected outcomes of these tools and techniques.
- A thorough conditioning process must be established to ensure that the dog and the handler are competent in safely and effectively implementing the equipment and techniques.
- Trainers must document and regularly review the effectiveness of their training plans and make necessary adjustments if the plan proves ineffective or leads to unintended consequences

Certification Compliance & Accountability

The CCPDT is committed to holding certified trainers accountable for adhering to CCPDT policies, positions, and practices. The Certification Compliance Committee investigates claims of misconduct involving CCPDT certificants and candidates. Certificants must be ready to explain their choice of methods and equipment, ensure their behavior change plans align with the CCPDT Standards of Practice and Code of Ethics, and show a commitment to reinforcement-based training strategies. This includes consulting with other professionals or referring clients to another certified dog training professional when dealing with ineffective training plans or cases beyond their expertise.

CCPDT certificants and candidates found in violation of these expectations are subject to sanctions imposed by the Certification Compliance Committee, up to and including suspension or revocation of certification as outlined in the CCPDT Certification Compliance and Disciplinary Procedures.

Conclusion

The Certification Council for Professional Dog Trainers remains committed to humane and evidence-based dog training practices. Our position emphasizes the importance of reinforcement-based training strategies, personalized behavior change plans, and ongoing professional development to ensure the well-being of dogs and the effectiveness of training outcomes.

The CCPDT acknowledges that it cannot account for bad actors within the dog training or behavior consulting community, nor can it address all misunderstandings or misinformation in the broader community. CCPDT certificants can competently navigate the complexities of dog training and behavior consulting by adhering to the CCPDT Standards of Practice and Code of Ethics, including the Hierarchy of Behavior Change Procedures. Our Standards of Practice, Code of Ethics, and other policies and positions aim to provide clear, ethical, and practical guidance, fostering a professional community committed to best practices and continuous learning.

We recognize that dog training is an ever-evolving field, and we are committed to supporting our certificants through continued education, dialogue, and collaboration with the broader professional community. Together, we can ensure that dog training practices continue to advance, prioritizing the welfare of dogs and the safety and satisfaction of their owners, caretakers, and communities. While the CCPDT upholds industry-recognized baseline standards and can impose sanctions for violations of its practices, policies, and positions, it recognizes that its role is advisory rather than regulatory due to the lack of legally enforceable standards for the dog training industry. This understanding guides our emphasis on prescriptive policies that encourage best practices and adherence to ethical standards.

The CCPDT is committed to setting comprehensive standards that support dog trainers in making effective, ethical, and welfare-oriented decisions. We acknowledge that the complexities of dog training and behavior consulting cannot be fully encapsulated in a single position statement and strive to provide guidance that reflects the depth and breadth of the field. The CCPDT calls on all dog training professionals to uphold these industry-recognized baseline standards, engage in ethical practices, and contribute to a culture of excellence and continuous improvement in dog training and behavior consulting. By doing so, we can collectively enhance the human-animal bond and promote dogs' overall well-being.

Background

Founded in 2001, the CCPDT was established as an independent credentialing organization, distinct from educational providers, certificate courses, and membership associations. The CCPDT serves a singular purpose: to assess and validate professional competence in dog training and behavior consulting. This independence ensures that our certification standards are objective, science-based, and rooted in the highest principles of professional ethics.

Our certificants - whether earning a Certified Professional Dog Trainer-Knowledge Assessed® (CPDT-KA®), Certified Professional Dog Trainer-Knowledge and Skills Assessed® (CPDT-KSA®), or Certified Behavior Consultant Canine-Knowledge Assessed® (CBCCKA®) credential - represent a broad range of practice areas. Every candidate meets strict eligibility requirements and demonstrates the necessary competencies in dog training and behavior consulting by passing a comprehensive, psychometrically sound certification examination. The National Commission for Certifying Agencies (NCCA) accredits our certifications, a distinction that reflects our dedication to competence, fairness, and scientific integrity.