

The following is an open letter on behalf of multiple trainer members of The Association of Responsible Dog Owners.

For the attention of The Courier (Scotland); The Daily Record (Scotland) and the Scottish SPCA

The Issue

- 1) On the 14th January 2020, we became aware via social media messaging, of a change.org petition which had been launched in relation to a planned visit to Scotland from a Mr Jeff Gellman of Solid K9 Training in Rhode Island, USA. The petition calls for the respective council authority and members of the Scottish Parliament to prevent Mr Gellman from conducting a 2-day dog training seminar in Scotland later in the year, based on concerns surrounding Mr Gellman's dog training practices. The Courier newspaper (online) also published a story on 14th January 2020, titled "VIDEO: Anger as US dog trainer who 'hit' dog on camera announces Perthshire seminar".

Background

- 2) The Courier article included a video, which has been publicly accessible for some time, taken during one of Mr Gellman's previous dog training seminars in Las Vegas, USA. The video shows Mr Gellman standing alongside a Great Pyrenees dog with the dog's female owner (who is leaning on a walking aid of sorts) standing on the other side of it. The dog is sitting between the two. As the dog looks off to the left of the screen, the female owner says "No", causing the dog to look up towards her face. At this point, Mr Gellman is seen to raise his right arm above his head with what is believed to be a rolled up cotton towel in his right hand, which he brings swiftly and forcefully down, striking it across the top of the dogs head with a single blow. This action causes the dog to emit a single yelp, lower its head and upper body, whilst simultaneously moving nervously away from Mr Gellman towards the owner. The owner then appears to say something to the dog, which sounds similar to: "That's what's going to happen to you next", at which the room fills with laughter and light applause as Mr Gellman can be heard to say light heartedly "Don't threaten your dog!". The video shown is a short edit, taken from a longer video of the whole seminar. The unedited video shows that a short while before the dog was struck by Mr Gellman, it appears to have demonstrated active reactivity towards another dog in the room. Mr Gellman claims elsewhere on a publicly available video, that the striking incident was in direct response to the dog looking back towards the other dog, in preparedness for further potential reactivity towards it. This information is missing from the short video edit posted in the Courier article.
- 3) The act of striking a dog with a rolled-up cotton towel or using the towel as a projectile to be thrown towards a dog demonstrating undesirable behaviour to either interrupt or punish the behaviour/dog is nothing new; neither is it exclusive to Mr Gellman. Given the title 'bonking', the procedure was popularised by another individual in the USA – Mr Gary Wilkes. Online videos show Mr Wilkes discussing and demonstrating the procedure, using what is believed to be an attendee's dog at several of his own dog training seminars/workshops. In one such video titled 'Teachbonk – How to learn to throw a bonker accurately' (2014), Mr Wilkes states:

“Whatever you use to inhibit the behaviour must be considered *intolerable* by the animal. That does not mean painful, that does not mean dangerous, or risky or anything else”.
To the best of our knowledge, Mr Wilkes has not been mentioned in the media coverage surrounding Mr Gellman’s intended visit.

The Public and Media Response

- 4) The Daily Record also published an article on the story on 14th January 2020, with the title: “SSPCA urges Scots dog owners not to pay £600 for sessions with ‘abusive’ electric shock collar trainer”. In it, SSPCA Ch. Supt. Mike Flynn, advised people not to attend to “go and learn to be cruel to my dog”. Representing the evidence-based welfare charity - the SSPCA – Mr Flynn also was also quoted in The Courier, saying:
“E-collars are something we do not agree with .. I find it a very lazy method of trying to train a dog .. The Scottish SPCA, Dogs Trust and the likes of the Edinburgh Cat and Dog Home rehome .. would [n]ever use these collars and I’ve never heard of a vet recommending one.”
- 5) The SSPCA is quoted on a second Change.org petition with over 85,000 signatures, as having “urged people to boycott Gellman’s classes”. Days later, Mike Flynn tweeted in response to a BBC Scotland Nine report on Mr Gellman:
 - i. “If nobody signs and pays he will not come. I would advise no one to pay hundreds of pounds to learn how to frighten and be cruel to their dog .. Pain and fear is no way going to train a dog. If a dog has a real problem, they should speak to their vet or a responsible welfare organisation”; with the Scottish SPCA (official) adding:
 - ii. “Dogs should be trained using patience and kindness – they cannot be trained using fear or pain through a one-off seminar.”
On 18th January 2020, former T.V. show presenter and businesswoman Victoria Stilwell, tweeted: “This is unacceptable. This man’s training techniques are likely to cause permanent psychological damage as well as physical harm to the dogs he is training.”
 - iii. In a Tweet, TV vet Dr Judy Puddifoot MRCVS, referred to the video as: “Blatant animal abuse under the animal welfare act” adding “This guy needs to be prosecuted and banned from being anywhere near animals! Ever!”

Our Response

- 6) The Association of Responsible Dog Owners (ARDO) support a steadfast ethical commitment to protecting and enhancing canine welfare; dedicated to securing safety and working for controlled freedom of behavioural expression. We are sympathetic and understanding towards the necessary, proportionate and humane use of all legitimate training aids in the appropriate circumstances.
We strive to remain objective and pragmatic in our decisions, being careful to base our responses, and recommendations on all available evidence; actively avoiding emotional ‘knee-jerk’ statements.

In this situation, a physically impaired owner, has permitted a physically capable male (Mr Gellman) to use what appears to be a rolled-up cotton towel to strike her dog on top of the head as part of a dog training seminar demonstrating an example of positive punishment to address a perceived behavioural before an audience. The dog is described (though not evidentially confirmed) to have previously risked physical injury to the female owner due to its reactive behavioural responsive towards other dogs when on lead. The striking with the cotton towel (bonking) is essentially a means of administering a physical punishment to the dog, with a limited capacity to cause actual *physical* trauma/tissue damage. It is a form of positive punishment, with the target aim of reducing the frequency (or probability) of the behaviour with which *the dog* attributes its occurrence. Shortly prior to the dog being struck on the head by the towel, it was seen to actively react toward another dog in the room and it is this reactivity in the dog, for which the physically impaired owner is seeking help from Mr Gellman, and what Mr Gellman in turn uses to justify his actions.

- 7) It is unknown whether Mr Gellman had discussed the option of rehoming the dog prior to the seminar. Given the dog's breed and the owner's physical restrictions, this option should arguably have been considered prior to resorting to such a highly intrusive behavioural intervention.
- 8) Standard ethical procedure in the face of unwanted behaviour would involve teaching the dog some alternative, incompatible behaviour, which the trainer could strengthen through positive reinforcement. Instead, Mr Gellman appears here, to rely exclusively on positive punishment to alter behaviour. Whilst we recognise that there are aspects of behaviour modification where this might prove beneficial to the dog, such as environmental stimulus/context linked aversive conditioning for welfare/life threatening associations, this situation would not satisfy the ethical criteria required.
- 9) Upon the owner saying the word "No", the dog is forcefully struck by the towel within 1 second. At the point of being struck, the dog is looking up at the owner, raising several concerns.
 - i. The dog cannot effectively avoid the impending punishment within 1 second, meaning that this is an aversive conditioning procedure, aimed at causing the word "No" to become a conditioned punisher, or a punishment 'marker'.
 - ii. The purpose of aversive conditioning is to create a strong, negative association with the behaviour which 'caused' the punishment. As this was the first repetition of this procedure, it is highly doubtful that the dog made the intended association, between his behaviour the moment the owner called "No" and the punishment that followed. The more natural association would be either with Mr Gellman himself, or with looking to the owner, which is the behaviour the dog was exhibiting the moment he was struck.
 - iii. The dog clearly realises that the punishment came from Mr Gellman, since it is Mr Gellman from whom the dog cowers away. There is no indication whatsoever, that the dog has associated any behaviour towards another dog as the cause of the punishment.

- iv. Given what is empirically and scientifically known of punishment and behavioural psychology, it is highly unlikely that a single strike from a cotton towel would be sufficiently 'intolerable' to permanently suppress the target behaviour in the dog, even if he was capable of making the intended association. Given the physical challenges facing the owner, it is also unlikely that she would be able to replicate the procedure on her own, raising concerns as to the choice of aversive intervention. 'What is the benefit in demonstrating something that will need repeating if the owner is unlikely to be capable of repeating it?'
 - v. There doesn't appear to be any consideration given to ABA or ABC renewal effects in the procedure – how the dog transfers what is learned between different contexts? Essentially, we would question how the dog is expected to generalise the suppression to alternative contexts and in higher states of arousal – especially where the conditioned punisher (Mr Gellman) is absent?
 - vi. We would ask what "No" is expected to mean to the dog? What is the dog expected to do in response to hearing the word "No", since there is no such behaviour as 'not doing'? We would consider it fairer and more practical to teach a command the dog could follow and receive reinforcement, rather than exclusive reliance on behavioural suppression.
 - vii. We would question why an alternative and acceptable behaviour has not been taught and instructed/communicated to the dog either before or after the punishment and why 'not-reacting' appears to have gone ignored or unreinforced?
- 10) When it comes to effective, efficient behaviour or stimulus-associated punishers, we do not believe that dog trainers should encourage naïve, companion dog owners to resort to physically 'striking' or throwing projectiles at their dogs. The probability of mistrust; avoidance; 'hand-shyness' and/or counter-aggression developing between dogs and owners who have physically (manually) punished them is both considerable and avoidable. There are certainly safer and equally if not more effective alternatives.
- 11) We do not condemn the inclusion of punishment where it is necessary, proportionate and humane, meaning that it fits the relevant criteria to maximise welfare potential whilst minimising risk, not just to the dog, but to other animals or persons affected by the behaviour of the dog. Equally, we do not condone punishment where it is deemed or shown to be unnecessary; disproportionate; ineffective or poorly considered.

Our Concerns and Recommendations

- 12) Whilst we do not endorse the actions described above, we have a number of concerns regarding the handling of this matter by both the Media and the SSPCA .
- i. We do not support the common process of 'trial and sentencing' through a social media courtroom. It seems a popular tactic to selectively present and sensationalise partial evidence

through emotive narrative to gain supportive and accusatory ‘knee jerk’, visceral responding. We find it disappointing that the SSPCA and Mr Flynn have fuelled this process, especially given the fact that Mr Flynn is highly experienced in the need to gather and objectively consider full evidence prior to making public comments with inflammatory potential.

- ii. Unless privy to a seminar agenda, we do not support the publication of unproven hypothetical accusations by either the SSPCA or Mr Flynn as regards what Mr Gellman might or might not do or intend to do at a private seminar. We would expect more from such an established, professional organisation and would encourage a written, public apology in relation to these points.
- iii. We would question and seek a written response as to why The Daily Record chose to steer a story based on a video showing Mr Gellman striking a dog with a cotton towel, down a path condemning the use of electronic training collars? Indeed, when it comes to the professional, necessary and proportionate inclusion of communicative tools for avoidance learning, the electronic training collar is unsurpassed in terms of safety, precision and sophistication.
- iv. We would question and seek a written response from the SSPCA, as to why Mr Flynn spoke only of electronic training collars in the Daily Record article, when the video clip did not involve the use of such training aids? We note that Mr Gellman has thousands of publicly accessible and freely available videos involving electronic training aids, spanning a 10year timeframe. Given the availability of such evidence, we would question why the SSPCA, (who have actively supported a long-standing campaign to ban electronic training aids) chose not to publicly appeal against Mr Gellman’s previous visits to the UK.

13) The Association of Responsible Dog Owners do not condone the physical striking of dogs, unless such action is deemed essential in protection of self or others from an immediate threat. Whilst we acknowledge and accept that aversive interventions might form a necessary and justifiable component of a holistic training or behaviour modification programme, we firmly believe that the greatest emphasis should be on teaching and strengthening desired/preferable alternative behaviours.

14) As an Association, we do not and will not support any practices involving animals involving punishment that is considered unnecessary; excessive; unpredictable or unavoidable by the animal. The way in which Mr Gellman is shown to be treating the dog in the video concerned, contravenes what we would consider to be ethical conduct and is not representative of anything that we would practise, support, recommend or promote.

We look forward to receiving a response from The Courier; The Daily Record and the SSPCA in relation to the points raised within this letter.

Sincerely,

The Association of Responsible Dog Owners

Committed to welfare and safety