

Removing the dog during a run is a form of “time-out.” When implemented properly, time-out is a negative punishment procedure because the dog learns that when he emits the specific behavior, he is prevented from the opportunity to earn further rewards for a specified period of time. Time-out was developed as a means for teaching children to inhibit undesirable behavior, without resorting to corporal punishment. The intensity of time-out can vary from lying a dog down for a few seconds to banishing the dog to his crate for a few hours. The effectiveness of time-out, whether applied to children or to dogs, depends on numerous factors. What should you contemplate before using time-out in your agility training?

Time-Out!

Imagine you’re running a Standard course at a local trial. You need the leg. Your dog is clean. The A-frame is coming up... The dog is up, over, and off, clearly missing the yellow zone. The judge’s arm is raised. What do you do? Do you continue running as though nothing happened? Do you shake your head in exasperation and finish the course? Do you stop and scold your dog? Do you pick your dog up and excuse yourself from the ring?

Refusing to allow the dog to continue running the course when a mistake occurs is a training technique popular among agility handlers. I’ve seen dogs carried off, heeled off, or walked off for missing contacts, breaking a stay at the start or on the table, knocking a bar, or any other possible complication while on course including generally wild and unresponsive behavior. Does a dog learn anything from this approach?

Question #1: Was the dog actually responsible for the mistake?

The dog cannot learn from time-out and change his future behavior if he was not the member of the team that *made* the mistake in the first place! Sadly, I often see handlers carrying their dogs out of the ring, in a huff, when the dogs did exactly what the handlers had asked of them. The handler, at least at the time, doesn’t realize that the dog is being punished for



listening and responding to the handler’s signals. Talk about sending conflicting information to the dog! I recommend restricting time-out to mistakes that are clearly, no questions asked, the dog’s fault. In agility, this limits time-out to the stay at the start, the position and stay on the table, and hitting the contacts. Everything else that could go wrong is just as likely, if not more so, to be the handler’s fault.

Conclusion: Never punish the dog for following your instructions.

Question #2: Does your dog understand the correct performance?

I wish I had a nickel for every time I’ve heard, “He’s knows it but refuses to do it in the ring.” Are all those dogs really conniving, malicious beasts intent on making our lives miserable? It is fundamental that the dog be trained to perform the behavior correctly before imposing time-out for incorrect performance. If the dog jumps off the dogwalk before the contact, does he truly understand what he is to do at the end of the ramp? It’s not sufficient to say, “He never misses in training” because often, you behave differently at trials, and the dog is “cranked” at trials.

Have you proofed your dog to hit his contacts even when you are nervous, jittery, handling with less confidence, elated, and so on? Have you proofed your dog to hit his contacts when people are cheering, other dogs are barking, he hasn't received his usual amount of daily exercise, first thing on a crisp morning, on different equipment, outside when you typically train inside, and so on? Is he able to hit his contacts *on the very first run* when you're proofing? If you have to do something to let him know that he made a mistake in order for him to alter his behavior and that is something you can't or don't do at a trial, then every run at a trial will be like "the first time."

Conclusion: Establish reliable performance before using time-out.

Question #3: Is your criteria consistent in training and competition?

Besides proofing your training so that you can expect your dog to perform reliably in competition, you must also be precise in defining for your dog what you expect of him. Dogs are very literal when they learn. Maybe you believe you've trained your dog to come to a full two-on/two-off stop on the contacts, but is it possible that you also reinforce the dog for stopping with all four feet on the obstacle, for the dog getting all four feet in the yellow zone at full speed with no stop, for the dog performing a two-on/two-off coming off the side, or for the dog doing a two-on/two-off but only after stopping and looking at you many times during the descent? The criteria for correct performance vary drastically among these examples. From the dog's perspective, it is unfair to accept all these variations!

You must define exactly what you expect from your dog and require it for reinforcement in training. Then, if you expect your dog to recognize that competition is no different from training, you must maintain the same criteria there. This is particularly tricky! We get excited, we want to win, we want the Q, so we let small errors go, especially if we're still clean. Now, I'm not advocating that you should require a solid stop on the contacts during a Steeplechase Finals run, but you'd better be doing it at local trials and in runs at major competitions that matter less. If you've been sloppy in your training and handling, how can you possibly demand precision from your dog?

Conclusion: Maintain training criteria in training and in the ring!

Question #4: Are you truly removing fun for the dog?

Time-out from finishing a course can only work if the dog is highly motivated to run the course. The dog has to want to run the course more than anything else at that time. A time-out for a dog that would rather leave the ring and chew on a rawhide or play with a toy is not going to work. This is like

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banishing a teenager from the dinner table for time-out in the bedroom with a DVD player, Internet access, and a telephone! Time-out is a relative phenomenon. It won't work if the dog has an incredibly good time watching other dogs run agility either! In fact, giving a dog a time-out by sending him to his barren crate is still often preferable to working with an exasperated and annoyed handler. I often see pet dogs that learn to run to their crates when owners are angry with them—they never learn not to perform the behavior that made the owner angry in the first place—they only learn to avoid the angry owner by taking themselves to time-out!

Conclusion: Time-out only works for dogs that love agility.

Question #5: Can your dog recognize what prompted the time-out?

Learning from mistakes can only happen if the dog is aware of what he did wrong. The most effective means for helping the dog make sense of what you're doing is to immediately mark the mistake (a "no reward" mark). Using a word or phrase is best because you can talk to your dog in the ring. I say, "I don't think so" in a matter-of-fact voice. I use this when my dog chooses to come off the contact before I release him. Ideally, it comes out of my mouth the instant his feet leave the obstacle to help him understand why I have stopped the fun.

It is important that you be consistent in your routine. If you pick your dog up in training, then pick him up in the ring. If you heel him out in training, heel him out in the ring. If you lie him down in training, lie him down in the ring. What you should *not* do is act the same as if you are finished running the course. Nor should you run a few more obstacles until another mistake is made and then walk off. The dog hasn't been keeping track of the numbers—the only way he can know that you're aborting a run rather than just finishing a run is by *your* behavior.

Conclusion: Use a verbal marker to highlight the incorrect performance.

Question #6: Are your time-outs general or specific to a certain behavior?

Scientific evidence suggests that animals are better able to identify their errors if the trainer restricts one type of consequence for one type of mistake. For example, maybe you use time-out for missing contacts and you run out of the training building when your dog becomes distracted by smells on the floor. The idea is to have a unique consequence for each error your dog makes. If your dog makes too many mistakes to imagine generating unique consequences, then it is time for some remedial foundation training. You don't have to fix everything all at once. Help the dog with most of

the problems so that his success is guaranteed. Focus on only one or two common mistakes, so as not to overwhelm your dog and degrade his motivation for the sport. It's no fun for a dog to fail all the time.

Conclusion: Use time-out for a specific error rather than a general all-purpose punishment.

Question #7: How long should a time-out endure?

Time-out is maximally effective when it is short. The primary effect of time-out occurs in that instant when the dog expects to move on to the next obstacle and you stop and pull him off. Dogs are not like children. They don't lie there mentally kicking their own butt, saying, "Geesh, if only I'd stayed on the contact, I'd have had another 12.6 seconds on that course!" Walking off the course and lying the dog down for 30 seconds or so is quite sufficient.

Conclusion: Keep time-out short.

Question #8: Are the conditions of training the same after the time-out?

There is another reason why it's better to keep time-out short. Returning the dog to the situation while he's still in the same motivational state permits learning from the time-out. For instance, imagine that a puppy behaves in an unruly manner because it is overly excited. If you place the puppy in time-out until the puppy calms down and then bring him back out, the puppy has not necessarily learned to control his behavior when excited. You've changed his motivational state: he's now calm, and this causes a change in his behavior. He's likely to behave exactly the same way again the next time he gets overly excited. It's best to bring the puppy back out while he is still wound up so he can learn *how* to behave while excited. Likewise, if you use time-out in agility training, make sure it is of sufficiently short duration that the dog is still in the same state when you bring him out again. Repeat the same or a similar sequence of obstacles so the dog can learn that if he performs in one way, he has to stop while if he performs in a different way, he gets a treat and/or continues running.

Because of this complication, time-out is less effective at a trial because you cannot bring the dog back out a few seconds later to try again. Often the dog has to wait hours for his next run. Suppose your dog has a problem with staying at the start line on his first run each day. Giving him a time-out may *appear* to help because by the next time he gets a chance to run, he's no longer as cranked and manages a solid stay. However, each morning it's the same old story because your dog really isn't learning anything from the time-out. A momentary time-out is best for competition because you can provide the dog with immediate feedback on his performance ("You messed

up the contact") and still continue to work him in the same motivational state. In the ring, I give the same verbal marker as I do in training ("I don't think so") but instead of giving my dog a time-out completely, I just stop running and have him wait for a second or two. Almost invariably, his contacts are more reliable for the rest of the weekend.

Conclusion: Time-out may appear to be working when all that's happened is the dog has calmed down.

The Proof is in the Pudding

Time-out is a non-aversive teaching tool that has been scientifically studied. Its effectiveness is solely dependent on an intelligent application. Like any punishment, time-out is *more effective, the less often* it is used. Judiciousness is key.

My question to agility handlers who use time-out is "Does it work?" If you have to keep taking the dog out, over and over again in competition, then I'd argue it's not working and you should try a different approach. If the dog's not learning from time-out, you might as well get your money's worth and keep running! ↗

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