

Factors that affect intended adoption of reward-based training reported by a cohort of puppy owners.

Joshua Woodward¹, Rachel Casey¹, Michelle Lord¹, Rachel Kinsman¹, Séverine Tasker^{2,3}, Toby Knowles², Rosa Da Costa¹, Emma Buckland¹, Jane Murray¹

¹ Dogs Trust, London, United Kingdom

² University of Bristol, Bristol, United Kingdom

³ Linnaeus Group, Shirley, United Kingdom

Objectives

Almost all dog owners use reward-based training methods, but some additionally use aversive methods (e.g. physical reprimands, sound/spray distractions). Our objective was to identify factors associated with intended use of training approaches that used only reward-based methods.

Methods

A nested case-control study was conducted on a sample of owners of puppies <16 weeks of age, living in the UK and Republic of Ireland recruited to a longitudinal study. For owners with >1 study dog, one dog was randomly selected for analysis.

Associations between intended training methods (reward-based methods only/training that included >1 aversive method) and potential risk factors (previous dog ownership, owning ≥ 1 other dog(s), dog-related employment [e.g. dog trainer, rehoming centre] and intentions for the dog) were tested using Chi-square ($\alpha \leq 0.05$).

Results

Of 819 owners, 256 (31.3%) intended to use only reward-based methods. Owners who worked with dogs were three times more likely to report intention to use reward-based methods only, compared with owners without such employment (OR=2.87, 95%CI=1.79-4.60, $P < 0.001$). Compared with owners who did not own another dog, owners with ≥ 1 other dog(s) were more likely to report intentions for training based only on reward-based methods (OR=1.60, 95%CI=1.19-2.16, $P = 0.002$).

Statement

Intention to use a mixture of reward-based/aversive training methods was very common within this cohort, despite existing evidence of the disadvantages of using mixed training approaches. Increased awareness of optimal training approaches for dogs is needed, especially for owners without dog-related employment and without other household dogs.