

Best way to train farm dogs has lessons for all dog training

September 2 2014, by Verity Leatherdale

Dogs provided with the best living conditions and kinder training methods are giving the best results in the workplace, according to a new study of farm dogs from the University of Sydney's Faculty of Veterinary Science.

"The new findings serve as a guide to ways of optimising working dog performance and welfare," says one of the study's authors Professor Paul McGreevy.

The study, recently published in *PLOS ONE*, shows that handlers who use electric shock collars report less success in training than those who use [positive reinforcement](#). Positive reinforcement for dogs can include food rewards, verbal praise, physical contact and play.

The results reflect data on over 4000 dogs. Associations were identified between success rate and seven variables: dog breed, housing method, trial participation, age of the dog at acquisition, hypothetical maximum treatment expenditure and the conscientiousness score of the owner's personality.

Although the study focuses on farm dogs, the insights also have potential relevance to companion dogs and those dogs working in other contexts. For example, it reported that success rate was positively associated with how often dogs exercised.

"The role of conscientiousness in handlers is particularly interesting as it

is relevant to the best handling and training methods," Professor McGreevy said. "We know that good animal training is underpinned by consistency and timing."

So, handlers who are consistent give clearer commands while those with good timing can, for example, allow their dogs to make the strongest association between behaviour and the appearance of rewards.

Although low numbers of handlers appear to be using electric shock collars, the risks to dog welfare are significant, especially in the hands of less accomplished trainers. There is evidence that these devices can make [dogs](#) withdrawn and less likely to work well. Bad timing can create highly undesirable associations with aspects of the dog's surroundings, including people.

"[Previous studies](#) have shown that trainers with lower levels of education are more likely to use harsh training methods, such as these," Professor McGreevy said.

"The results emphasise the importance of not only examining the genetic predispositions of the working dog but also the impact the handler can have on a dog's success in the workplace."

More information: Arnott ER, Early JB, Wade CM, McGreevy PD (2014) Environmental Factors Associated with "Success Rates of Australian Stock Herding Dogs." *PLoS ONE* 9(8): e104457. [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0104457](#)

The complete working dog survey report is available online: www.daff.gov.au/data/assets/...rking-dog-survey.pdf

Provided by University of Sydney

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