DEBATE PLAYBOOK

For Force-Free Practitioners Engaging Balanced and Aversive-Based Trainers

A practitioner reference for podcast appearances, online exchanges, in-person debates, client conversations, and continuing education sessions. Ten pillars, fifteen rhetorical moves, twelve objections, ten defensive justifications, and the citation block to deploy them.

Companion to The Scientific Case Against Aversive Dog Training Equipment and Methods.

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How to Use This Playbook

This document is a deployment companion to the policy paper. The paper is the long-form citable case. This is the practitioner's debate reference. Read it through once for the structure, then keep it accessible as a quick lookup during podcast appearances, online exchanges, in-person debates, client conversations, and continuing education sessions.

Section 1 sets the frame, the single most important move in any debate over aversive equipment and methods. Sections 2 through 5 are the substance: the ten pillars of the argument, the fifteen terminology and rhetorical moves to recognize and counter, the twelve objections most likely to come up, and the ten defensive justifications that proponents use to make aversive use sound cautious, necessary, or moderate. Section 6 is the citation block to keep in pocket. Section 7 is closers. Section 8 names the practitioner mistakes that most often derail force-free debaters.

A one-page rip-card is provided as a separate file for quick on-the-spot reference. The rip-card is a stripped distillation; the playbook is the studied version.

Section references throughout point to The Scientific Case Against Aversive Dog Training Equipment and Methods (Bangura, 2026), the source for the underlying evidence and citations.

1. The Frame: Refuse the Wrong Question

Most debates over aversive equipment and methods get trapped inside the wrong question. The wrong question is whether these tools work. The right question is how they work, what welfare costs come with that mechanism, whether those costs are necessary, and whether broad public access is justified when safer alternatives exist.

Efficacy of suppression is not in dispute within learning theory. Anything sufficiently unpleasant delivered contingently can suppress behavior. Conceding this up front frees the debate to move to the question that actually matters: the welfare and necessity case.

Opening move: *"I'm not going to argue with you about whether shock or prong collars work. They can change behavior. So can a lot of things. The question is how they change it, what that costs the dog, and whether that cost is necessary when alternatives exist that produce the same outcome without it."*

Once the frame is established, the proponent has to either accept the welfare and necessity question or refuse to engage it. Refusing to engage exposes the position. Accepting the question moves the debate onto evidentiary ground where the convergent welfare research overwhelmingly favors the force-free position.

2. The Ten Pillars

These are the ten conceptual moves that carry any debate over aversive equipment and methods. Internalize them. Three formulations are given for each: the technical version (the academic statement), the plain version (one to two sentences in conversation), and the thirty-second version (a single line for fast deployment).

Pillar 1. The Mechanism Is Aversive, Regardless of Label

Technical. Aversive stimuli are defined functionally, not descriptively. A stimulus that drives avoidance, escape, or termination behavior is, by behavior-science definition, aversive, regardless of what vocabulary describes it.

Plain. Whatever the trainer or manufacturer calls the device, the dog's nervous system processes the experience the same way. The label does not change what is actually happening.

Thirty-second. If it changes behavior through avoidance, it bothers the dog. That is what aversive means.

> *Cross-reference: Policy paper Section 2.1.*

Pillar 2. The Intensity Dial Proves the Mechanism

Technical. The existence of an intensity adjustment, and the clinical necessity of escalating it when the dog does not respond, is itself evidence that the mechanism is aversive control. If the stimulus were not functioning as an aversive, escalation would have no effect.

Plain. Every shock collar has a dial that goes higher. That dial exists because sometimes the trainer has to turn it up to get a response. If the lower setting were already enough, nobody would need a higher setting. The dial is the proof.

Thirty-second. Why does the collar have a dial? Because sometimes you have to turn it up. That is the answer.

> *Cross-reference: Policy paper Section 2.2.*

Pillar 3. The "Barely Perceptible" Contradiction

Technical. If the stimulus is behaviorally meaningful enough to change behavior through escape, avoidance, or suppression, it is by functional definition aversive. If it is not behaviorally meaningful, it is not doing the training work. There is no intermediate category.

Plain. Some trainers say the modern e-collar is so mild the dog barely notices. But if the dog barely noticed, it would not change the behavior. If it changes the behavior, the dog is noticing. Both things cannot be true.

Thirty-second. If the dog barely feels it, it would not work. That it works tells you the dog feels it.

> *Cross-reference: Policy paper Section 2.3.*

Pillar 4. Mechanism, Not Tissue Damage, Is the Welfare Question

Technical. Nociceptive engagement and threat-system activation occur well below the threshold of visible tissue damage. Nociceptors fire to warn the organism away from potentially damaging stimuli before damage occurs (Dubin and Patapoutian, 2010), and the International Association for the Study of Pain definition of pain explicitly includes potential tissue damage and applies to nonhuman animals (Raja et al., 2020). Canine haired-skin epidermis is approximately three to five cell layers thick, considerably thinner than human epidermis (Affolter and Moore, 1994), so a self-test on the human forearm or wrist systematically underestimates what the canine nervous system receives at the same delivered energy. Compounding this, the relationship between user setting and delivered stimulus across commercial e-collars is heterogeneous: an eighty-seven-fold range across products, an eighty-one-fold median ratio within collars, manufacturing faults in two of thirteen new collars, and no point-of-sale disclosure of stimulus parameters (Lines, van Driel, and Cooper, 2013). The biological question is whether the stimulus crosses the nociceptive threshold, not whether it crosses the injury threshold.

Plain. The welfare question is not whether the collar leaves a mark. The international scientific definition of pain explicitly includes potential damage. Nociceptors fire before injury, by design. Canine skin is much thinner than human skin, so self-tests on the human forearm underestimate what the dog feels. And the e-collar industry does not disclose stimulus parameters at point of sale. The “low setting” on the dial does not tell you what the dog actually feels.

Thirty-second. Pain does not require visible damage. The international pain definition says so. And canine skin is much thinner than ours.

> *Cross-reference: Policy paper Section 4.1.*

Pillar 5. Convergent Evidence, Not One Study

Technical. The welfare evidence is sufficiently convergent across multiple independent methodological approaches, populations, countries, and outcome measures to support precautionary welfare policy. No single study carries the case alone, and the agreement across methodologies eliminates the possibility that the welfare signal is a methodological artifact.

Plain. This is not based on one study. Fifteen peer-reviewed studies from multiple countries, using different methods, including controlled experiments, observational research, surveys of thousands of guardians, cognitive bias tests, and clinical referral data, all find the same welfare cost. When that many independent methods point in the same direction, the evidence is sufficient for precautionary welfare policy.

Thirty-second. It is not one study. It is fifteen, in different countries, with different methods, all pointing the same direction.

> *Cross-reference: Policy paper Section 3 and Section 3.6.*

Pillar 6. The Necessity Claim Has Not Been Supported Under Best-Practice Conditions

Technical. Where the necessity claim has been empirically tested under best-practice conditions, with industry-nominated trainers (Cooper et al., 2014; China, Mills, and Cooper, 2020), the tools produced welfare cost without producing better outcomes than reward-based methods. Independently, board-certified veterinary behaviorists, the clinical specialty that treats the most severe canine aggression, anxiety, fear, and predatory cases, treat those cases as their standard of care without aversive equipment. The American College of Veterinary Behaviorists has formalized this position in its December 2025 letter to the American Veterinary Medical Association.

Plain. The necessity claim has been tested directly. Industry-nominated trainers using e-collars in controlled studies produced welfare cost without producing better outcomes than reward-based trainers. Separately, the veterinary specialists who handle the worst aggression and anxiety cases in the country do not use shock or prong collars. The American College of Veterinary Behaviorists, the highest credential in this field, does not include aversive equipment in its standard of care.

Thirty-second. Tested with industry-nominated trainers, the tools added nothing. The veterinary specialists who treat the toughest cases do not use them.

> *Cross-reference: Policy paper Section 5.1, Section 5.4, and Section 7.1.*

Pillar 7. Adding Food Does Not Subtract the Aversive

Technical. Compound schedules pairing positive reinforcement with positive punishment or negative reinforcement do not eliminate the welfare cost of the aversive component. The dog's nervous system continues to register and respond to the aversive event regardless of whether food reinforcement is present in parallel.

Plain. Some trainers say it is fine to use a shock or prong collar as long as you also give the dog treats. Adding treats does not erase the shock. The dog's brain still registers the unpleasant event. The peer-reviewed studies that have looked at this directly find welfare costs even when food rewards are also present.

Thirty-second. Treats do not cancel out shocks. The dog's brain registers both.

> *Cross-reference: Policy paper Section 4.4.*

Pillar 8. International Consensus Is Already In

Technical. Aversive training equipment is prohibited or restricted in multiple national and subnational jurisdictions across Europe, the United Kingdom, Australia, North America, and Latin America, and is opposed by every major international veterinary, welfare, and professional behavior organization that has

issued a position statement, including the FVE, FECAVA, FEEVA, and WSAVA joint position paper of June 2024.

Plain. Wales has banned shock collars since 2010. Switzerland banned spike, pinch, and electronic collars in 2008. Germany under case law since 2006. Austria's Federal Animal Protection Act of 2004 took force in 2005 prohibiting spike collars, prong collars, and electric and chemical training devices. Slovenia restricts electronic training collars under its 1999 Animal Protection Act. Denmark prohibited remote-controlled and automatically operating electric devices and prong collars in 2009. Norway prohibited electric training devices, anti-bark electric collars, invisible electric fences, and prong collars in 2009 (in force 2010). The Netherlands restricted pinch collars in 2018 and electric stimulation devices comprehensively by 2021. Sweden prohibited equipment delivering electric shocks and spike collars in 2018 (in force 2019). Belgium-Wallonia enacted a regional order on 15 December 2022, in force 1 April 2023, prohibiting use of electric collars, sound-signal and chemical-substance accessories, and choke and prong collars on dogs, with limited derogations. Belgium-Flanders adopted a 2018 decree under which an electric-collar prohibition, excluding invisible-fence collars, comes into force 1 January 2027. Spain prohibited electric, impulse, punishment, and choke collars under Ley 7/2023, in force September 2023. Finland prohibited electric and spike collars under the Animal Welfare Act 693/2023 (in force 2024). Quebec banned them in 2024. France prohibited them in professional contexts under the Arrêté of 19 June 2025. Colombia in 2025. Gibraltar, a British Overseas Territory, enacted a statutory prohibition on electronic, choke, and pronged collars in March 2026 under the Animals (Amendment) Act 2025. Most of Australia has prohibited various combinations of these tools. Every major veterinary organization that has reviewed the evidence has reached the same conclusion. The United States is increasingly the outlier on this issue.

Thirty-second. Multiple jurisdictions across Europe, Australia, North America, and Latin America have banned or restricted these tools. The United States is the outlier.

> *Cross-reference: Policy paper Section 7.4 and Table 5.*

Pillar 9. Active Avoidance Is Anxiety, Not Welfare Neutrality

Technical. Active avoidance is goal-directed instrumental behavior under threat, not a welfare-neutral compliance state (Cain, 2019). The shift from a fear state to an anxiety state during effective avoidance does not eliminate the underlying threat representation; the warning stimulus retains its conditioned threat value. Controllability modulates downstream consequences but does not render the stressor benign (Maier and Watkins, 2005). Safety signals acquire their value entirely from their inverse relationship with the aversive contingency, and overtrained avoidance becomes habitual via the dorsolateral striatum, the same circuit implicated in obsessive-compulsive disorder (Gillan et al., 2014) and in stronger avoidance habits in survivors of early life stress (Gordon et al., 2020) (Sears et al., 2026).

Plain. Some sophisticated balanced trainers will say that successful e-collar training transitions the dog to an anxiety state where the dog is positively reinforced by the absence of shock, and that this exempts the training from welfare scrutiny. The contemporary neuroscience does not support that interpretation. Safety signals acquire their value entirely from their inverse relationship with the aversive event. Without the

aversive event, no warning stimulus acquires threat value, no feedback cue acquires safety value, and the avoidance response is not reinforced. The aversive contingency is the precondition for the entire learning architecture. The calm-looking dog is in an anxiety state mediated by an effective avoidance response, not in the absence of threat representation. And the brain circuit that mediates overtrained avoidance is the same circuit implicated in obsessive-compulsive disorder and in survivors of early life stress.

Thirty-second. The safety signal is defined by the aversive event. Take away the aversive, the safety signal means nothing. The aversive is the precondition.

> *Cross-reference: Policy paper Section 4.3 and Section 9.12.*

Pillar 10. Predictability and Controllability Do Not Eliminate the Welfare Cost

Technical. Controllability and predictability attenuate but do not eliminate threat-related neural responding (Limbachia et al., 2021; Maier and Watkins, 2005). They do not render aversive stimulation neurologically neutral or welfare-benign. This has been confirmed in writing by Dr. Luiz Pessoa, the senior author of Limbachia et al. (2021), and Dr. David Knight, the senior author of Wood et al. (2014). Both senior authors of the studies most often cited by proponents to support controllability and predictability as welfare-neutralizing factors have explicitly disclaimed the proponent reading of their own work.

Plain. Some trainers say a shock the dog can predict and control is welfare-neutral. The neuroscience says the opposite. Predictability and controllability reduce how strongly the brain responds, but they do not eliminate the threat response. The senior researchers whose work is most often cited to support the proponent claim, Dr. Pessoa and Dr. Knight, have confirmed in writing that their research does not support that claim.

Thirty-second. Predictable shocks still hurt. The researchers being cited say so themselves.

> *Cross-reference: Policy paper Section 4.3.*

3. The Fifteen Moves: Terminology and Rhetorical Decoder

Recognize these moves when they appear. The general principle is the same in every case: behavior science defines procedures by their function, not by their label. Whatever vocabulary variant the proponent introduces, the diagnostic question is whether the procedure depends on the dog working to avoid, escape, or terminate a stimulus. If yes, it is aversive.

Group A. Euphemisms That Rename the Aversive Stimulus

Move 1. “Stim,” “stimulation,” “e-touch,” or “tap” instead of “shock”

Translation. Marketing language, not behavior-science language.

Response. What we call it does not change what the dog’s nervous system does with it. If the stimulus is strong enough to make the dog change its behavior to avoid it, that is an aversive event by any scientific definition.

Move 2. “Correction” instead of “punishment”

Translation. In operant conditioning, positive punishment is the application of a stimulus following a behavior that decreases its future probability. Calling it a correction does not move it out of the operant punishment quadrant.

Response. In behavior science, the procedure is named by what it does, not by what we call it. If applying the leash pop reduces the behavior, it is positive punishment. That is the definition.

Move 3. “Pressure” or “tap” instead of “pinch” or “compression”

Translation. Used for prong and choke collars to suggest the mechanical event is mild.

Response. Mechanical force that successfully reduces lead pulling is, by functional necessity, exceeding the dog’s mechanonociceptive threshold. If it were below that threshold, it would not change the behavior.

Move 4. “Self-correction” for prong collars

Translation. Used to imply the dog, not the handler, is the cause of the aversive event, and therefore that no punishment is being applied.

Response. Procedures are defined by their contingencies, not by the identity of the agent who closes the contingency. When the dog pulls and the prong applies concentrated pressure, the dog has experienced a behavior-contingent aversive event. The operant function is identical.

Group B. Reframings of the Tool’s Function

Move 5. “Communication tool” instead of “aversive device”

Translation. Communication does not require an aversive event. Verbal cues, visual cues, hand signals, and trained markers all communicate without aversive consequences.

Response. If the device communicates by applying an unpleasant consequence the dog works to avoid, it is functioning as an aversive device, regardless of how the handler frames it.

Move 6. “Working level” or “minimum effective level”

Translation. Used to imply that low-level e-collar use is welfare-benign.

Response. The working level is the level at which the stimulus is sufficient to change behavior. Behavior change driven by escape, avoidance, or suppression requires the stimulus to function as an aversive event. Working level and aversive level are the same level.

Move 7. "Pavlovian" or "classical conditioning" framing

Translation. Sometimes invoked to suggest the e-collar functions through associative learning rather than punishment.

Response. Classical conditioning to an aversive unconditioned stimulus is the foundational paradigm of fear-conditioning research. Calling the procedure classical does not exempt it from welfare cost. And in actual e-collar training, the operant component (behavior-contingent stimulation the dog learns to escape or avoid) is the working mechanism.

Group C. Methodological Frame Reframings

Move 8. "Balanced" training as a moderate middle ground

Translation. The term implies that balanced training combines reward-based and aversive methods in a moderate, considered way, and that force-free is the extreme position.

Response. Balanced training is defined by the inclusion of positive punishment and negative reinforcement, regardless of whether positive reinforcement is also present. The inclusion of aversive procedures, not the proportion, is the methodological signature. The convergent welfare evidence applies to any methodology that includes aversive procedures.

Move 9. "LIMA" invoked to defend aversive use

Translation. LIMA properly applied requires that less intrusive interventions be demonstrably exhausted before more intrusive interventions are considered.

Response. LIMA requires you to document that less intrusive methods do not work for this specific case before you escalate. Routine use of aversive equipment without that documented hierarchy is not LIMA. It is the label of LIMA on a different practice.

Move 10. "All four quadrants"

Translation. Behavior science describes four operant procedures functionally. This is a descriptive taxonomy, not a normative endorsement.

Response. Pointing to the existence of four quadrants does not establish that all four should be used routinely on companion dogs. Descriptive science does not equal prescriptive endorsement. The welfare research has specifically established costs associated with positive punishment and negative reinforcement that are not associated with positive reinforcement.

Group D. Conceptual and Logical Deflections

Move 11. “Pack leader,” “alpha,” or “dominance” framing

Translation. The conceptual basis was Schenkel’s 1947 captive-wolf study, generalized into the alpha-pack-leader model that became part of popular dog training in the late twentieth century.

Response. The wildlife biologist L. David Mech, whose own earlier work helped popularize the alpha framing, has retracted it in the peer-reviewed literature (Mech, 1999) and in subsequent published commentary (Mech, 2008). Contemporary canine ethology does not support dominance-based confrontational handling on domestic dogs. The framing has been retracted by one of its own original popularizers, in print.

Move 12. “My dog tells me when to use it” / “the dog asks for the correction”

Translation. Behaviors interpreted as the dog asking for the correction are commonly displacement behaviors, conflict behaviors, or stress signals.

Response. Reading those signals as consent reverses the inferential direction. The behaviors are evidence of the welfare cost, not evidence of the dog’s endorsement of the procedure that produced them.

Move 13. “It worked for my client” / “I have hundreds of success stories”

Translation. Anecdotal individual cases. Visible behavioral suppression and welfare cost can coexist.

Response. A dog whose problem behavior has been suppressed by an aversive intervention is not, by that fact alone, a dog whose welfare has been preserved. The visible outcome and the unmeasured outcome (conditioned emotional response, threat-circuit engagement, affective state, relationship cost) are not the same. Population-level controlled and observational research is the appropriate evidence base for welfare claims.

Move 14. “Positive reinforcement does not work for serious cases”

Translation. Empirically not supported by the clinical practice of board-certified veterinary behaviorists.

Response. ACVB Diplomates treat the most severe canine aggression, anxiety, fear, and predatory cases without aversive equipment, using behavioral assessment, environmental management, reward-based behavior modification, and psychiatric medication when clinically indicated. The clinical specialty that handles the hardest cases does not use aversive equipment as standard of care.

Move 15. “Safety signal” or “the dog is positively reinforced by safety”

Translation. The most sophisticated current proponent argument. Cites contemporary neuroscience to argue that successful e-collar training transitions the dog to an anxiety state where the safety signal (the absence of shock) functions as positive reinforcement, and that this exempts the training from welfare scrutiny.

Response. The Sears et al. 2026 paper that this argument leans on says the opposite. Safety signals acquire their value entirely from their inverse relationship with the aversive contingency. Without the aversive event, no warning stimulus acquires threat value, no feedback cue acquires safety value, and the avoidance response is not reinforced. The aversive contingency is the precondition for the entire learning architecture. Calling it positive reinforcement by safety does not change that the aversive event must occur for the safety signal to mean anything. And the dorsolateral striatum circuit that mediates overtrained avoidance is the same circuit implicated in obsessive-compulsive disorder and in survivors of early life stress. The clinical population overlap is the welfare cost the argument tries to wave away.

4. The Twelve Objections: Counters and Kill Shots

These are the objections most likely to come up in live debate. For each: a one-paragraph response and a one-sentence kill shot for moments when time is short.

Objection 1. “You are cherry-picking studies”

Response. The argument does not rest on any single study. It rests on multiple independent lines of evidence using different methods, populations, and outcome measures: welfare-focused experimental studies, direct observational studies, guardian survey data, confrontational handling clinical data, peer-reviewed physical-effects research on neck-pressure equipment, threat-circuit and fear-conditioning neuroscience, stress neurobiology, and the gate-control theory of pain that underwrites the TENS-versus-shock distinction. A critic who wants to dismiss the convergence must explain why each independent methodological line is wrong, why the same welfare signal would appear across such different methods by coincidence, and why every major veterinary organization that has reviewed the evidence has reached the same conclusion.

Kill shot. Cherry-picking is selecting one study. Convergence is fifteen-plus studies, different methods, same answer.

> *Cross-reference: Policy paper Section 9.1.*

Objection 2. “Cortisol was not significant in Cooper 2014”

Response. Cortisol is one measure, and a blunt one. Behavioral stress indicators in Cooper et al. (2014) were significant in the electronic collar group, and these are validated welfare markers in canine research. Dismissing a study on the basis of one non-significant physiological measure while ignoring significant behavioral measures is not a methodological critique. It is selective reading.

Kill shot. Cortisol is one measure. The behavioral stress markers in Cooper hit significance. That is welfare harm, regardless of the hormone assay.

> *Cross-reference: Policy paper Section 9.2.*

Objection 3. “The reward groups just had more reinforcement”

Response. This either concedes that the aversive equipment added no outcome benefit (in which case it carried welfare cost for no training advantage), or reduces to a hypothetical about a better-designed protocol that has not been tested. The trainers in the aversive equipment groups of Cooper and China were industry-nominated, and the high-reinforcement protocol was available to any trainer who wanted to deliver it. They did not.

Kill shot. If the reward group did better with more reinforcement, that is the answer. Use more reinforcement. The collar added nothing.

> *Cross-reference: Policy paper Section 9.3.*

Objection 4. “Controllability and predictability make aversive use safe”

Response. Controllability and predictability reduce the magnitude of threat-related neural responding. They do not convert aversive stimulation into a neutral stimulus. Dr. Luiz Pessoa, senior author of Limbachia et al. (2021), and Dr. David Knight, senior author of Wood et al. (2014), have each confirmed in writing that their research cannot be used to support the proponent claim. Their statements are interpretive support: they confirm the reading of the published studies at the level of authorial intent.

Kill shot. Predictable shocks still hurt. The researchers being cited say so themselves, in writing.

> *Cross-reference: Policy paper Section 9.4.*

Objection 5. “Low-level stim or gentle corrections are benign”

Response. If the stimulation is behaviorally meaningful enough to change behavior through escape, avoidance, or suppression, it is by functional definition aversive. Independently, the engineering measurement work by Lines, van Driel, and Cooper (2013) showed an eighty-seven-fold range across thirteen commercial collars at maximum settings, an eighty-one-fold median ratio within collars across user-dial settings, and manufacturing faults in two of thirteen new collars including one that delivered a maximum-strength impulse regardless of user setting. The user dial is not a reliable proxy for what the dog feels.

Kill shot. If it is mild enough to not bother the dog, it is mild enough to not work. And the dial does not tell you what the dog actually feels.

> *Cross-reference: Policy paper Section 9.5.*

Objection 6. “It is not really aversive, the dog just finds it weird and wants to turn it off”

Response. “The dog wants to make it stop” is a plain-language description of negative reinforcement. The dog’s behavior is being maintained by termination of a stimulus. Any stimulus that functions as a negative reinforcer is, by definition, an aversive stimulus. There is no category of “weird but not aversive” in the experimental learning literature that supports avoidance learning. A merely novel stimulus produces an orienting response followed by habituation; the fact that e-collar stimulation continues to drive behavioral modification across hundreds of trials without habituating shows the dog’s nervous system is not classifying it as merely novel.

Kill shot. “The dog wants to turn it off” is the textbook definition of aversive. You just described negative reinforcement and called it neutral.

> *Cross-reference: Policy paper Section 9.6.*

Objection 7. “An electronic collar is just like a TENS unit”

Response. TENS and electronic training collars have opposite therapeutic purposes and therefore opposite electrical parameters. TENS is calibrated to selectively activate large-diameter A-beta touch fibers without crossing the nociceptive threshold; the goal is reduction of pain perception. An electronic collar must deliver a stimulus the dog works to avoid, escape, or terminate, which by definition means crossing the nociceptive threshold. The two devices cannot share a biological mechanism because they have opposite biological goals. TENS is also FDA-regulated as a medical device with required disclosure of pulse parameters; electronic collars are not.

Kill shot. TENS is designed to reduce pain. An e-collar has to produce something the dog works to avoid. Opposite mechanisms. Not the same device.

> *Cross-reference: Policy paper Section 9.7.*

Objection 8. “The prong collar just gets the dog’s attention”

Response. If the prong were only an attention-getting device without an aversive component, the dog could be trained to stop pulling with any other attention-getting device, including a tap, a verbal cue, or a sound. The specific efficacy of the prong collar is its mechanical delivery of an aversive event. The vocabulary of “attention” does not change the mechanism of action.

Kill shot. If it were attention, a hand clap would do it. The prong works because it hurts.

> *Cross-reference: Policy paper Section 9.8.*

Objection 9. “The choke chain mimics how a mother dog corrects her pups”

Response. This claim is biologically inaccurate. Mother dogs do not perform sustained neck constrictions on their puppies. The alpha-wolf mythology underlying this claim originated with Schenkel’s 1947 captive-wolf study and was popularized in late twentieth-century dog training literature. L. David Mech, one of the original popularizers, has retracted the framing in the peer-reviewed literature (Mech, 1999) and in subsequent published commentary (Mech, 2008).

Kill shot. Mother dogs do not strangle their puppies. Mech retracted the mythology himself, in print.

> *Cross-reference: Policy paper Section 9.9.*

Objection 10. “My dog looks happy in training”

Response. Visible engagement is not a physiological readout. Threat and stress circuitry do not announce themselves through tail posture or eye expression alone. Once avoidance learning is well established, a dog may perform fluently and quickly precisely because the behavior prevents the aversive event. Fluency in the instrumental response is compatible with ongoing threat prediction. This is the active avoidance picture set out in Cain (2019) and Sears et al. (2026): the calm-looking dog is in an anxiety state mediated by an effective avoidance response, not in the absence of threat representation.

Kill shot. What a dog looks like in fifteen seconds is not what is happening in its nervous system across time.

> *Cross-reference: Policy paper Section 9.10.*

Objection 11. The Rescue Device Pattern (Unfalsifiability)

Response. When every study showing harm is set aside for a different methodological reason (Cooper had reinforcement differences, Vieira de Castro was not randomized, cortisol is complicated, neuroscience is in humans, Herron relied on guardian reports, Carter used a model neck), the methodology critique is being used as a rescue device rather than a genuine pursuit of better evidence. The diagnostic question is: what would count as evidence against the tools? If the answer is that no existing study, no convergent finding across disciplines, no professional consensus, and no regulatory precedent would be sufficient, then the position is not scientifically falsifiable.

Kill shot. What evidence would change your mind? If nothing would, this is not a scientific disagreement.

> *Cross-reference: Policy paper Section 9.11.*

Objection 12. “Modern e-collar trained dogs are in a goal-directed anxiety state, not under threat”

Response. This is the most sophisticated current proponent argument. It invokes contemporary neuroscience (Cain, 2019; Sears et al., 2026) to claim that successfully trained dogs have transcended the

aversive contingency through avoidance, and that the resulting calm anxiety state exempts the training from welfare scrutiny. The neuroscience does not support that reading. The shift from fear to anxiety during effective avoidance does not eliminate the underlying threat representation. The warning stimulus retains its conditioned threat value; what changes is that the dog has acquired a behavioral option that controls exposure to the aversive event. When the avoidance response is blocked or fails, the fear state returns along with inflexible defensive reactions. And the dorsolateral striatum circuit that mediates overtrained avoidance is the same circuit implicated in obsessive-compulsive disorder (Gillan et al., 2014) and in stronger avoidance habits in survivors of early life stress (Gordon et al., 2020). The clinical population overlap is the welfare cost the argument tries to wave away.

Kill shot. Anxiety state is not welfare neutral. The dog has built an avoidance habit using the same brain circuit OCD recruits.

> *Cross-reference: Policy paper Section 9.12.*

5. The Ten Defensive Justifications: Translation and Counter

Where the Ten Pillars frame the affirmative case, the Fifteen Moves decode rhetorical maneuvers, and the Twelve Objections meet challenges to the welfare evidence, this section addresses the recurring set of justifications proponents deploy to defend aversive equipment and methods. The posture is different. The Moves rename the stimulus or reframe the procedure. The Objections push back on the welfare science. The Justifications attempt to make aversive use sound cautious, necessary, compassionate, or moderate. They carry emotional weight, and audiences often grant them a presumption of reasonableness. Each one deserves a direct, evidence-anchored answer.

The diagnostic principle is the same as elsewhere. A procedure is named by its function, not by the framing offered for it. Each justification is given with a Translation, a Response, and a Kill shot.

Justification 1. “It is a last resort, after positive reinforcement failed”

Translation. The aversive tool is presented as the trainer’s reluctant final option, deployed only after reward-based methods have been exhausted on a dog described as stubborn, dominant, high drive, dangerous, or too far gone.

Response. A claim that “positive reinforcement failed” is scientifically weak unless it specifies what was actually attempted. The diagnostic questions are whether the dog was kept below threshold, whether the reinforcers were functionally adequate, whether the antecedent arrangement was appropriate, whether environmental management was in place, whether medical contributors were assessed, whether psychiatric medication was considered when clinically indicated, and whether the intervention addressed the underlying emotional function of the behavior. The framing routinely treats poor implementation of reinforcement-based

training as evidence that reinforcement-based training itself is inadequate. Ziv (2017), reviewing seventeen studies that compared training methods, found no evidence that positive punishment is more effective than positive-reinforcement-based training and concluded that aversive methods can jeopardize dogs' physical and mental health. The burden of proof remains on the person advocating the more intrusive procedure to demonstrate not merely that the tool can suppress behavior, but that it is necessary, more effective, and less harmful than available alternatives. That burden is not satisfied by a description of what failed; it is satisfied by a documented exhaustion of less intrusive methods, which is rarely produced.

Kill shot. "Positive reinforcement failed" is not a finding. It is a description. Show me what was actually tried.

> *Cross-reference: Policy paper Section 9.15.*

Justification 2. "These tools save lives"

Translation. The strongest emotional appeal in the proponent toolkit. The claim is that without aversive equipment, some dogs would be surrendered, euthanized, or remain too dangerous to live in human communities. Framed in its strongest form, it is a binary: aversive tools or the dog dies.

Response. Serious behavior cases rarely have only two possible outcomes. Appropriate intervention may include functional behavior assessment, environmental management, safety planning, trigger avoidance, muzzle conditioning, differential reinforcement, counter-conditioning, systematic desensitization, long-line safety, secure containment, veterinary assessment, adjunctive medication when clinically indicated, and referral to a board-certified veterinary behaviorist. The American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior states that animals with challenging behavior disorders, including aggression, should be treated with effective, compassionate, humane methods, lists no exceptions to that standard, and specifically advises against tools that involve pain, including choke chains, prong collars, and electronic shock collars (AVSAB, 2021). The "saves lives" claim also requires population-level evidence to be more than rhetorical. If banning aversive equipment predictably increased euthanasia, bites, or relinquishment, that claim would be supported by reliable epidemiological data from jurisdictions that have enacted bans. The published case for that harm has not been made. Anecdotes, individual success stories, and predicted outcomes are not population-level evidence.

Kill shot. The veterinary behavior specialty that handles the worst cases in this country does not use these tools. The "saves lives" claim is not what those clinicians' caseloads show.

> *Cross-reference: Policy paper Section 9.15.*

Justification 3. "It is not punishment, it is clear communication"

Translation. Re-labeling. The electronic stimulation is described as a "tap," a "cue," "pressure," or "information." Attention is shifted from the dog's experience to the trainer's intention.

Response. Intention does not determine the behavioral function of a stimulus. If the stimulus suppresses behavior, interrupts behavior, compels behavior, or teaches the dog to respond in order to avoid or terminate

the sensation, then the procedure is functioning through positive punishment, negative reinforcement, or both. “Communication” is not a separate category in operant conditioning. A stimulus can communicate information and still be aversive. A warning signal that predicts an unpleasant consequence is a communication, and the procedure is still aversive. Cooper et al. (2014) studied electronic-collar training in the field and found that dogs trained with electronic collars spent more time tense, yawned more frequently, and engaged in less environmental interaction than dogs in a reward-based comparison group, while guardian-reported efficacy did not differ significantly across groups. The “communication” label does not resolve the welfare question. It only changes the trainer’s vocabulary.

Kill shot. The label does not change the mechanism. Communication does not require a stimulus the dog works to escape.

> *Cross-reference: Policy paper Section 9.15.*

Justification 4. “Modern collars are used at low levels and do not hurt”

Translation. The number on the device is offered as a proxy for the dog’s subjective experience. Low setting, low experience.

Response. The dog’s perception of the stimulus depends on individual sensitivity, context, predictability, controllability, emotional state, prior learning history, arousal, coat and skin factors, and the behavior being interrupted or punished. The user dial does not deliver any of those variables. The logic of the claim is also internally unstable. If the sensation is not salient enough to influence behavior, it has no training value. If it does influence behavior through escape, avoidance, suppression, interruption, or compliance, it is functioning as an aversive event for that dog in that context. Cooper et al. (2014) documented welfare-relevant behavioral differences in dogs trained by industry-nominated trainers following manufacturer-associated protocols, and China et al. (2020), focused on objective efficacy measures, found that training with electronic collars was not more efficient and produced no advantage in disobedience rates compared with positive-reinforcement-focused training. “Low level” describes the dial. It does not describe the dog’s experience. (See also Pillar 3 and Move 6 for the technical formulation of this point.)

Kill shot. If it is mild enough not to bother the dog, it is mild enough not to work. The dial is not the dog.

> *Cross-reference: Policy paper Section 9.15.*

Justification 5. “The dog looks happy in training”

Translation. Visible engagement and obedience are offered as evidence that the dog is unaffected by the aversive stimulation. The dog wagging, taking food, performing cues, or appearing controlled is treated as a welfare readout.

Response. Visible behavior is an incomplete measure of welfare. A dog can continue to eat, respond to cues, wag, and appear behaviorally controlled while experiencing stress, conflict, suppressed body language, or negative affect. Vieira de Castro et al. (2020), comparing companion dogs from reward-based,

mixed-method, and aversive-based training schools, found that dogs in the aversive-based group displayed more stress-related behaviors, were more frequently in tense and low behavioral states, panted more during training, and exhibited higher post-training increases in cortisol than dogs in the reward-based group. Dogs in the aversive-based group, defined in the study as schools using high proportions of aversive techniques (0.76 and 0.84), also showed a more pessimistic response pattern in a cognitive bias task than dogs in the reward-based group, indicating welfare effects beyond the training session itself. The authors frame this welfare cost as occurring especially when aversive methods are used in high proportions. The proponent claim treats the visible behavior in the training session as the welfare endpoint. The peer-reviewed welfare research treats it as one channel among several, and the channels do not agree with the “looks happy” reading. (See also Objection 10 and Pillar 9 on the active-avoidance framing of the same picture.)

Kill shot. Cortisol and cognitive bias do not announce themselves through tail position. The dog can look fine and still be in a worse affective state.

> *Cross-reference: Policy paper Section 9.15.*

Justification 6. “Some dogs need consequences”

Translation. A sanitizing reframe. “Consequence,” “accountability,” and “boundary” substitute for pain, startle, intimidation, fear, or escape-avoidance pressure.

Response. All learning involves consequences. Reinforcement-based training uses consequences continuously: access to desired outcomes, differential reinforcement, antecedent arrangement, removal of access to reinforcement when appropriate, and management. The scientific question is not whether consequences exist. It is which consequences, what learning processes they activate, and what emotional associations they create. Ziv (2017) concluded, after reviewing the comparative literature, that there is no evidence positive punishment is more effective than positive-reinforcement-based training, while aversive methods carry documented welfare risks for the dog’s physical and mental health. When “consequences” is used to mean an aversive stimulus the dog works to avoid, the word is doing rhetorical work, not analytic work. The ethical question is whether the selected consequence is necessary, proportionate, humane, and supported by evidence as the least intrusive effective option.

Kill shot. All learning has consequences. The question is which consequences. Reinforcement uses consequences too.

> *Cross-reference: Policy paper Section 9.15.*

Justification 7. “High-drive dogs need stronger tools”

Translation. Dogs described as high drive, intense, predatory, working-line, or environmentally over-aroused are presented as a category for whom reward-based training is insufficient and aversive equipment is necessary.

Response. High motivation in the presence of competing stimuli requires careful training design: distance, antecedent control, functional reinforcers, long-line safety, controlled exposure, prevention of rehearsal, gradual increases in difficulty, and reinforcement histories strong enough to compete with the environmental stimulus. The proponent argument frequently confuses inadequate setup with inadequate methodology. China et al. (2020) specifically evaluated dogs with off-lead behavioral problems, including poor recall and chasing, the classes of behavior most often invoked in the high-drive justification, and found that electronic-collar training was not more efficient and did not produce less disobedience than positive-reinforcement-focused training. The reward-focused group performed better on multiple measures and posed fewer welfare risks. The category of "high-drive dog" does not generate a separate evidence base in which aversive equipment becomes necessary. (See also Pillar 6.)

Kill shot. The most-cited test of necessity for off-lead and chase problems is China 2020, and the reward-focused group did better. The high-drive frame does not exempt the necessity claim from the evidence.

> *Cross-reference: Policy paper Section 9.15.*

Justification 8. "Electronic collars give dogs more freedom"

Translation. Off-leash control via remote stimulation is offered as an animal-welfare benefit. Freedom to move, sniff, and explore is presented as the trade for the device.

Response. The freedom argument is ethically real. Dogs benefit from movement, exploration, sniffing, choice, and species-typical behavior. The argument becomes problematic when remote aversive control is presented as the necessary price of that freedom. Safer alternatives exist for most contexts: long lines, fenced areas, secure fields, careful location selection, structured recall training, reinforcement-based off-leash preparation, and refraining from off-leash exposure before the dog has the recall skills to support it. The relevant welfare question is not whether the dog covers more physical territory. It is whether that territory is maintained through voluntary cooperation, environmental safety, and reinforcement history, or through the dog's avoidance of an unpleasant stimulus. If the dog's freedom depends on the threat of remote correction, the welfare analysis must include emotional safety, predictability, and the quality of the dog's learning experience, not only physical range.

Kill shot. Freedom maintained by threat of shock is not the same kind of freedom. Long lines and secure locations deliver the same range without the contingency.

> *Cross-reference: Policy paper Section 9.15.*

Justification 9. "Force-free trainers use force too"

Translation. The boundary between safety management and deliberate aversive training is erased. A guardian holding a leash to prevent a dog from running into traffic is described as using "force," and that example is then equated with leash corrections, prong collars, choke chains, and electronic stimulation.

Response. Physical restraint to prevent immediate harm is not the same procedure as the deliberate application of pain, discomfort, startle, threat, or escape-avoidance pressure as a behavior-change technique. A leash, barrier, crate, gate, muzzle, or long line can be used as humane safety management without functioning as a behavior-suppression tool. Force-free training does not mean no physical safety management ever occurs. It means the training plan does not deliberately rely on aversive stimuli to suppress, compel, or punish behavior. AVSAB (2021) makes this distinction explicitly, recommending environmental management and behavior modification while advising against tools and techniques that involve pain, intimidation, physical correction, or flooding. Conflating these is not an argument. It is a definitional move that pretends the categories do not exist.

Kill shot. Holding a leash to keep a dog out of traffic is not a leash correction. The mechanism is different. The intent is different. The dog's experience is different.

> *Cross-reference: Policy paper Section 9.15.*

Justification 10. "These tools are safe when used by skilled professionals"

Translation. The harm is attributed to misuse rather than to the tool or the underlying mechanism. Skilled application is offered as the variable that resolves the welfare concern.

Response. The available evidence does not support that reassurance. Cooper et al. (2014) studied electronic-collar training under field conditions with industry-nominated trainers experienced in the use of electronic collars and still identified welfare-relevant behavioral differences compared with reward-based training, without finding superior efficacy in the electronic-collar group. China et al. (2020), focused on objective efficacy measures, found that training with electronic collars was not more efficient, did not result in less disobedience, and posed greater welfare concerns than training focused on positive reinforcement. The comparison was not between professionals and amateurs. It was between professional trainers using electronic collars and professional trainers not using them, and the welfare and efficacy data did not favor the electronic-collar group. Skill may reduce some risks. It does not change the underlying behavioral mechanism, and it does not establish that the tools are necessary. (See also Don't 4.)

Kill shot. Tested with industry-nominated trainers operating under best-practice protocols, the welfare cost was still there and the efficacy advantage was not. Skill is not the explanatory variable.

> *Cross-reference: Policy paper Section 9.15.*

References for This Section

The five sources cited in Section 5 are listed below with verified DOIs and direct links. Full citations for sources used elsewhere in the playbook are in the policy paper References section.

American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior. (2021). *AVSAB position statement on humane dog training*. https://avsab.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/AVSAB-Humane-Dog-Training-Position-Statement-2021.pdf

China, L., Mills, D. S., and Cooper, J. J. (2020). Efficacy of dog training with and without remote electronic collars vs. a focus on positive reinforcement. *Frontiers in Veterinary Science*, 7, 508. https://doi.org/10.3389/fvets.2020.00508

Cooper, J. J., Cracknell, N., Hardiman, J., Wright, H., and Mills, D. (2014). The welfare consequences and efficacy of training pet dogs with remote electronic training collars in comparison to reward based training. *PLOS ONE*, 9(9), e102722. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0102722

Vieira de Castro, A. C., Fuchs, D., Morello, G. M., Pastur, S., de Sousa, L., and Olsson, I. A. S. (2020). Does training method matter? Evidence for the negative impact of aversive-based methods on companion dog welfare. *PLOS ONE*, 15(12), e0225023. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0225023

Ziv, G. (2017). The effects of using aversive training methods in dogs, A review. *Journal of Veterinary Behavior*, 19, 50 to 60. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jveb.2017.02.004

6. The Citation Block

These are the studies and authorities to be able to name on demand. Author, year, and the one-sentence finding. The full citations are in the policy paper References section.

Controlled Experimental Studies

Cooper, Cracknell, Hardiman, Wright, and Mills (2014). Industry-nominated e-collar trainers produced welfare-relevant behavioral stress in dogs and no training advantage over reward-based methods.

China, Mills, and Cooper (2020). Re-analysis confirming that reward-based training produced equivalent or better outcomes more efficiently than e-collar training. No necessity advantage.

Observational and Survey Studies

Schilder and van der Borg (2004). Shock-collar-trained working dogs showed elevated stress behaviors in training and in the broader training context, indicating conditioned emotional response.

Vieira de Castro et al. (2020). Aversive-trained dogs showed elevated post-training cortisol, more stress behaviors, and more pessimistic cognitive bias than reward-based-trained dogs.

Casey et al. (2021). Dogs trained with two or more aversive methods showed pessimistic cognitive bias compared with reward-based-trained dogs.

Herron, Shofer, and Reisner (2009). Confrontational handling produced aggressive responses in a substantial percentage of dogs in clinical referral data, including 31 percent for alpha rolls and 43 percent for hitting or kicking.

Masson, Nigron, and Gaultier (2018b). Among French e-collar users, 71.8 percent operated without professional advice and 7 percent of dogs showed physical wounds.

Starinsky, Lord, and Herron (2017). Electronic fence escape rate 44 percent versus physical fence 23 percent; no clear protective effect of electronic containment.

Ziv (2017). Review of seventeen studies comparing training methods. No evidence that positive punishment is more effective than positive-reinforcement-based training, and aversive methods can jeopardize dogs' physical and mental health.

Hiby, Rooney, and Bradshaw (2004). Survey of UK dog guardians; reward-based training correlated with higher reported obedience and fewer behavior problems; punishment-based training correlated with more behavior problems. Foundational early population-level study.

Blackwell, Twells, Seawright, and Casey (2008). Survey of 192 UK dog guardians. Mixed reward-plus-punishment use was associated with the highest aggression scores; reward-only training was associated with the lowest behavior-problem scores.

Arhant, Bubna-Littitz, Bartels, Futschik, and Troxler (2010). Survey of 1,276 Austrian dog guardians, with smaller and larger dogs analyzed separately. High-frequency aversive training correlated with increased aggression, excitability, and anxiety in both size groups.

Blackwell, Bolster, Richards, Loftus, and Casey (2012). Survey of UK dog guardians regarding electronic collar use. Guardian characteristics, not dog characteristics, predicted electronic collar use; users reported lower training success than non-users.

Casey, Loftus, Bolster, Richards, and Blackwell (2014). Population-level multivariable analysis identifying aversive training methods as an independent risk factor for human-directed aggression in dogs.

Deldalle and Gaunet (2014). Direct observational study of two French training schools, one using negative reinforcement and one using positive reinforcement. Dogs in the negative-reinforcement school showed significantly more stress-related behaviors and significantly less guardian-directed gaze.

Rooney and Cowan (2011). Home-based observational study of 53 dog-guardian pairs. Guardians who used more rewards had dogs who performed better on a novel learning task; guardians who used more physical punishment had dogs who were less playful with them.

Masson, de la Vega, Gazzano, Mariti, Pereira, Halsberghe, Leyvraz, McPeake, and Schoening (2018a). European multi-author review article that served as the evidence basis for the European Society of Veterinary Clinical Ethology position statement against electronic training devices.

Todd (2018). Analysis of barriers to widespread adoption of humane training methods. Identifies lack of trainer regulation, poor information environment, and inconsistent professional positions as structural drivers of continued aversive-method use.

Pain Neuroscience and Sensory Engagement

Dubin and Patapoutian (2010). Nociceptors fire below the threshold of tissue injury; their function is to warn the organism away from potentially damaging stimuli before damage occurs.

Raja et al. (2020). Revised IASP definition of pain explicitly includes potential tissue damage and applies to nonhuman animals.

Affolter and Moore (1994). Canine haired-skin epidermis is approximately three to five cell layers thick, considerably thinner than human epidermis.

Lines, van Driel, and Cooper (2013). 87-fold range across 13 commercial e-collars at maximum settings; 81x median ratio within collars; 2 of 13 with manufacturing faults; no point-of-sale disclosure of stimulus parameters.

Melzack and Wall (1965). Foundational paper introducing the gate-control theory of pain. Underlies the analgesic mechanism by which TENS units operate. Operates at sub-nociceptive intensities in the conventional sensory-level TENS modality the proponent analogy invokes, while other TENS variants exist and are not the comparator in the e-collar analogy. The conventional modality is the opposite end of the nociceptive spectrum from electronic training collars, which must cross the nociceptive threshold to drive avoidance.

Threat Circuitry and Active Avoidance

LeDoux (2014). Amygdala-centered defensive circuitry processes aversive events; circuit activation is not welfare-neutral.

Cain (2019). Active avoidance is goal-directed instrumental behavior under threat; the calm-looking dog is in an anxiety state, not in the absence of threat representation.

Maier and Watkins (2005). Controllability modulates downstream consequences of aversive stressors but does not render the stressor benign or stress-free.

Limbachia et al. (2021). Controllability over aversive stimulation attenuates threat-related neural responding without eliminating it.

Wood, Ver Hoef, and Knight (2014). Amygdala mediates emotional modulation of threat-elicited responses.

Sears et al. (2026). Rat shuttlebox active avoidance study. Safety signals acquire their value entirely from their inverse relationship with the aversive contingency. Overtrained avoidance becomes habitual via the dorsolateral striatum, the same circuit implicated in OCD (Gillan et al., 2014) and consistent with the avoidance-habit signature documented in survivors of early-life stress (Gordon et al., 2020).

Gillan, Morein-Zamir, Urcelay, Sule, Voon, Apergis-Schoute, Fineberg, Sahakian, and Robbins (2014). Enhanced avoidance habits in obsessive-compulsive disorder. Patients show stronger reliance on habitual

avoidance responding even when the contingency changes. Dorsolateral striatum implicated, the same circuit Sears et al. (2026) isolate for overtrained avoidance in animals.

Gordon, Patterson, and Knowlton (2020). Survivors of early-life stress show a preponderance of habitual responding on a novel instrumental avoidance learning paradigm, a behavioral signature consistent with dorsolateral striatum-dependent habit learning. Convergence with the Sears (2026) animal and Gillan (2014) clinical findings.

L. Pessoa (personal communication, April 10, 2026). Senior author of Limbachia et al. confirmed in writing that his research does not support treating controllable aversive stimulation as neurologically neutral or welfare-benign. Interpretive support: confirms the reading of the published study at the level of authorial intent.

D. C. Knight (personal communication, April 17, 2026). Senior author of Wood et al. (2014) confirmed in writing that his fear-conditioning research cannot be used to support the proposition that predictable aversive stimulation is neutral or benign. Interpretive support: confirms the reading of the published study at the level of authorial intent.

Foundational and Theoretical Works

Mowrer (1947). Foundational paper introducing two-factor (or two-process) avoidance learning theory. The organism first acquires a Pavlovian fear association to the warning signal, then operantly learns a response that terminates the warning signal. The framework explains why avoidance behaviors, once learned, are remarkably persistent and resistant to extinction. Directly relevant to electronic collar training, where the dog is in a continuous Pavlovian-plus-operant compound contingency.

Schenkel (1947). Observational study of captive wolves, the historical origin of the alpha-pack-leader framework that became dominance theory in late-twentieth-century dog training. The framework has been retracted by Mech (1999, 2008), the biologist whose 1970 book popularized it.

Mech (1999). Peer-reviewed retraction of the alpha-pack-leader framework by the wolf biologist whose 1970 book popularized that framework. Contemporary wolf biology does not support the dominance-based interpretation that became standard in late-twentieth-century dog training.

Mech (2008). Public-facing essay restating the retraction of the alpha-pack-leader framework. The most prominent scientific advocate for the framework has retracted it in both formal and informal venues. Contemporary canine ethology does not support dominance-based confrontational handling.

Physical Effects (Neck-Pressure Equipment)

Pauli, Bentley, Diehl, and Miller (2006). Collar pressure during ordinary pulling significantly elevates intraocular pressure; harness pressure does not.

Carter, McNally, and Roshier (2020). No collar tested produced neck pressures low enough to mitigate injury risk under realistic pull forces (83 to 832 kPa across 7 collar types).

Hunter, Blake, and De Godoy (2019). Peak contact pressure of 44.61 N/cm² transmitted to the canine neck during ordinary on-leash walking.

Grohmann et al. (2013). Peer-reviewed case report: fatal cerebral ischemia in a German Shepherd following punitive choke-chain hanging.

Rozanski (2022). Repeated collar pressure recognized clinical concern for tracheal collapse; harness recommended over collar; standard of care.

Studies to Be Ready For Proponents to Invoke

Johnson and Wynne (2024). Frequently cited by proponents as evidence of e-collar necessity for predatory chasing. The study establishes narrow efficacy under specific protocol conditions, NOT necessity, welfare neutrality, or broad real-world superiority. Methodology challenged in Bastos et al. (2025) peer-reviewed critique and Bangura (2025) SSRN methodological critique. Authors' published response (Johnson and Wynne, 2025) did not resolve the substantive methodological concerns.

Christiansen et al. (2001). Sometimes invoked to support controllable, predictable shock-collar use. The welfare measures relied largely on guardian report and temperament tests; methodological thinness, not a clean positive welfare conclusion, prevents the dataset from supporting a welfare-benign reading.

Tortora (1983). Sometimes invoked for e-collar use in aggression. The protocol was a complex multi-stage process beginning with positive reinforcement, not simple aversive conditioning. Author's own Experiment 3 undermines the proponent reading. 1983 design predates contemporary welfare-science methodology.

Lindsay (2005), Volume 3. Textbook chapter expressing one author's interpretation, not peer-reviewed welfare research. The characterization of low-level e-stim as a "tingle" conflicts with Dubin and Patapoutian (2010), Raja et al. (2020), and the engineering measurement findings of Lines et al. (2013).

Salgirli, Schalke, Boehm, and Hackbarth (2012). Sometimes invoked to argue that controllable e-collar use is welfare-benign in working dogs. The study compared three aversive training interventions (electronic collar, pinch collar, and a conditioned quitting signal) in 42 Belgian Malinois police dogs in Germany. The comparison was among three aversive modalities, not against reward-based training, and handler proficiency was not equally available across conditions. The study does not establish welfare neutrality of any of the modalities, and the working-dog protocol does not generalize to companion-dog training. Senior author Esther Schalke is an outspoken critic of electronic collar use in companion-dog contexts.

Steiss, Schaffer, Ahmad, and Voith (2007). Sometimes invoked to argue that bark-control collars are welfare-neutral on the basis of modest cortisol elevation. The study evaluated 24 kennel dogs (8 per group) wearing electronic, citronella spray, or inactivated control collars across a structured brief exposure protocol. Cortisol is one physiological measure, not a comprehensive welfare assessment, and behavioral stress markers and cortisol do not always converge. Cooper et al. (2014), despite a non-significant cortisol finding

in its main study phase, found significant behavioral stress indicators in the electronic collar group. Absence of cortisol evidence is not evidence of absence of welfare cost.

Schalke, Stichnoth, Ott, and Jones-Baade (2007). Sometimes invoked selectively. The study examined dogs trained with electronic collars under three conditions varying in predictability and contingency of stimulus delivery. Proponents cite the lower-stress sub-finding in the high-contingency condition, but the study's overall conclusion was that all three groups experienced welfare cost and that the variability of welfare risk across use conditions argues against approving the equipment for general use. Senior author Esther Schalke is an outspoken critic of electronic collar use. The proponent reading misrepresents the authors' overall conclusion.

Institutional Position Statements

FVE, FECAVA, FEEVA, WSAVA (2024). Joint position paper unanimously calling for a complete ban on the sale and use of electric pulse training devices including electric shock collars.

AVSAB (2021). Aversive methods including electronic collars, prong collars, choke chains, and leash corrections should not be used under any circumstances.

ACVB (December 2025). Letter to AVMA: shock collars are not medically necessary, not evidence-based for preventing euthanasia, and not aligned with the standard of care for veterinary behavior medicine.

AAHA (2015). Only acceptable training techniques are non-aversive, positive techniques.

ESVCE (European Society of Veterinary Clinical Ethology). Position statement opposing electronic training devices, grounded in the Masson et al. 2018a multi-author European review.

BVA (British Veterinary Association). Public and repeated calls for a complete ban on the sale and use of electronic shock collars for dogs and cats in the United Kingdom.

APDT International (November 2025). APDT International endorses the Joint Standards of Practice (November 2025), which commit signatory organizations to reward-based methods and explicitly reject the deliberate use of pain, fear, or intimidation in training. APDT International has formally distanced itself from broader certification frameworks that continue to permit electronic, prong, and choke collars.

IAABC (February 2025; November 2025 Joint Standards). In February 2025, IAABC sunset its previous shock collar addendum and adopted a clarified position explicitly opposing the intentional use of aversive stimuli, specifically requiring members to refrain from using shock in any training or behavior modification context, with members expected to help existing clients transition away from shock devices. IAABC also endorses the Joint Standards of Practice (November 2025).

BSAVA (British Small Animal Veterinary Association, 2024). Position opposes aversive training methods broadly. Aversive methods and devices, including electric shock collars, prong collars, spray collars, choke chains, and electric containment fences, have the potential to cause physiological and psychological suffering. BSAVA supports legislation banning the sale and use of devices that enable aversive training.

AVA (Australian Veterinary Association, 2022). Position holds that collars designed to inflict pain, discomfort, or fear to achieve behavioural change should not be used on dogs, naming electronic and prong collars specifically. AVA states that prong collars should be illegal in all Australian jurisdictions.

CVMA (Canadian Veterinary Medical Association, 2021). Strongly discourages aversive training techniques. Asserts that remote-controlled shock collars are not a necessary method of training or behaviour modification.

NZVA (New Zealand Veterinary Association). Does not support the use of electronic behaviour-modifying collars that deliver aversive stimuli for the training or containment of dogs. Recommends positive reinforcement methods instead.

PPG (Pet Professional Guild, October 2021). Position statement on the use of choke and prong collars. Use of collars and leads intended to apply constriction, pressure, pain, or force around a dog's neck (including choke chains and prong collars) should be avoided. Cites soft tissue damage, eye problems, strangulation, tracheal/esophageal damage, and neurological problems among documented physical harms. PPG actively recommends against use of choke and prong collars and promotes flat buckle collars, harnesses, and other safer control equipment. (PPG separately opposes electronic shock collars.)

7. Closers

Lines for ending an exchange when the opponent will not concede or move. These are not first moves. They are last moves, deployed after the substantive argument has been laid out.

"The veterinary behavior specialty that handles the hardest cases in this country has formally rejected the equipment you are defending. That is the answer to the necessity claim."

"Wales banned shock collars in 2010. Switzerland in 2008. Germany under case law since 2006. Austria since 2005. More than fifteen years of regulatory experience across multiple jurisdictions, and no published study attributes measurable public-safety harm to the prohibition. The necessity-from-public-safety claim has been put before that record, and the published case for harm has not been made."

"The two senior authors of the neuroscience studies you are citing have both confirmed in writing that their research does not support your interpretation. I have those communications. The argument from neuroscience does not work for the position you are defending."

"If you are invoking safety signals as positive reinforcement, the safety signal acquires its value from the aversive event. Take away the aversive, the safety signal means nothing. The contemporary neuroscience does not exempt the training from welfare scrutiny. It explains why a successfully avoidance-trained dog can look calm while being in an anxiety state mediated by the same brain circuit OCD recruits."

“What evidence would change your mind? If nothing would, this is not a scientific disagreement, and we should call it what it is.”

“Seventy percent of US guardians, in Petco’s own 2020 disclosure, believe shock collars harm their pet’s emotional or mental wellbeing. Sixty-nine percent consider them cruel. The market you are defending is not the market the consumer base actually wants.”

“The convergent welfare evidence catalogued in the peer-reviewed literature, the international veterinary consensus formalized in 2024, and the regulatory record across more than a dozen jurisdictions all point in the same direction. The case is not novel and it is not radical. It is the case the evidence has been making for a long time.”

8. The Don’ts: Practitioner Mistakes That Derail Force-Free Debaters

These are the mistakes most often made by force-free practitioners in live debate. Each is named, with a one-line corrective.

Don’t 1. Pursuing the dog-as-anecdote rabbit hole

The proponent will offer a story about a specific dog whose life was saved by an e-collar. Engaging the anecdote is a trap; you cannot win an exchange about a dog you have never met. Stay at population level. Anecdotes are evidence about anecdotes, not about the welfare profile of the equipment in the population.

Don’t 2. Defending studies on methodology rather than convergence

Every study has methodological limits. If the proponent attacks Cooper alone, you lose if you defend Cooper alone. The case is not Cooper. The case is convergence across fifteen studies. Move to the convergence frame and stay there.

Don’t 3. Operant quadrant pedantry without function

Getting drawn into a debate over which quadrant a procedure technically belongs to (positive punishment vs. negative reinforcement) is rarely productive in front of a public audience. The function of the procedure (does it depend on aversive stimulation?) is what matters. Stay functional.

Don’t 4. Conceding “professionals can use these tools safely”

This is the trap that splits the welfare argument into a tiered framework. The international veterinary consensus has explicitly rejected the tiered framing. The mechanism is aversive in any hands. Cooper and China studied industry-nominated trainers and the welfare cost was still there.

Don’t 5. Apologizing or hedging to seem reasonable

Hedging language (“maybe in some cases”, “it depends”, “sometimes”) reads as weakness in a debate context where the other side is making confident claims. The evidence is convergent. State it that way. Reasonableness is not the same as concession. (Note that softening categorical claims about absence of harm, as in Pillar 6 and the closers, or softening expansive geographic claims, as in the Pillar 8 thirty-second version, is not hedging. It is choosing claims you can defend rather than claims that invite hostile fact-checking.)

Don’t 6. Letting the proponent pivot from one tool to another

When the e-collar argument is failing, the proponent will pivot to prong collars (“well, prongs are different”). When prongs are failing, they will pivot to choke chains. When all three are failing, they will pivot to confrontational handling. The unified policy frame closes that pivot route. The mechanism is aversive control, regardless of which tool delivers it. Treat them as one category in the debate, the way the international veterinary consensus does.

Don’t 7. Forgetting to name the consensus

Force-free practitioners sometimes argue the welfare science alone and forget to name the institutional consensus. The consensus argument is independent and complementary. Naming the AVSAB, ACVB, AAHA, FVE/WSAVA, and the major welfare and professional organizations forces the proponent to argue not only against the science but against the entire field. Most cannot.

Don’t 8. Engaging tone with tone

Combative balanced trainers often deploy mockery, insult, or condescension. Matching their tone is rarely useful for the audience. The audience is not the opponent. Speak to the audience. Calm, accurate, evidence-anchored language wins the long game in front of mixed rooms even when it does not feel like winning in the moment.

Don’t 9. Accepting the safety-signal framing without naming the inversion

When a sophisticated proponent invokes Sears 2026 and argues that safety signals positively reinforce the dog’s avoidance response, the practitioner mistake is to engage on operant-quadrant terms (“technically that is negative reinforcement, not positive reinforcement”). The right move is to name the inversion: the safety signal acquires its value entirely from the aversive contingency, and without the aversive event the safety signal means nothing. Do not get drawn into the operant taxonomy debate. The aversive contingency is the precondition for the entire learning architecture, and the dorsolateral striatum circuit that mediates overtrained avoidance is the same circuit implicated in OCD and survivors of early life stress.

About the Author

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This Debate Playbook is the deployment companion to *The Scientific Case Against Aversive Dog Training Equipment and Methods* (Bangura, April 2026). The policy paper is the long-form citable case; this playbook is the practitioner's debate reference, designed for podcast appearances, online exchanges, in-person debates, client conversations, and continuing education sessions.