

Let's Talk About E-Collars: Why Dog Trainers Are So Divided

Speaker Key

SG Susan Garrett

Transcript

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Last week, I set out to do a podcast episode explaining why I choose not to use an electric collar with my dogs and with my students' dogs. And it sent me down a spiral of looking at all kinds of videos probably 30 or 40 hours over the last 10 days of videos that I've looked at of people using an electric collar.

Some videos I could watch only 90 seconds or more of, some videos I could watch less than 90 seconds of, other videos I watched a little bit more. And I want to share some of the things that I found and right off the top I'm going to say, I don't think it can all happen in one episode, but I hope both people who choose to use an electric collar and people like me who choose not to, will be interested in what I have to say.

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Hi, I am Susan Garrett, welcome to Shaped by Dog. And first, let's define the groups of trainers, and it's going to be so difficult to define people. There's people who choose to use an electric collar, and from what I've observed, you people got to get your shit together. And I don't mean that in a mean way either, stick with me on this.

There's people who choose not to choose an electric collar who maybe call themselves purely positive or force-free or reinforcement-based. You've got to hope that these people get their shit together. And I'll tell you why. First of all, I don't think there's a label for any camp, but for the sake of this episode, let's just say e-collar trainers are all going to be lumped into one group, and force-free trainers are going to be lumped into one group.

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None of us are force-free, the moment we put a leash on a dog, and if the dog sniffs at something and pulls, there's a little force. So, you know what? I don't know what the label is for us, but those who choose to train our dogs without the use of physical corrections or intimidation or aversives.

So, for those on the other side, let's not find a reason to throw stones. Let's try to be a little bit neutral in our thinking in this episode. It's going to be hard because we all have our own biases. I have my biases. My belief, I believe that dogs are doing the best they can with the education we've given them in the environment we've put them in. Therefore, any dog training problem I come up against, my immediate thought is to evaluate the [antecedent arrangements](#), evaluate what more can I do or try, what different environment can I try.

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So, all of us have a bias. It's going to be very difficult for me to have a conversation with anybody without my bias shining through. Now, some of you who choose electric collars, if you happen to be listening to this episode, welcome.

And I've had all kinds of sticks and stones thrown at me when people from your side of the fence talk about a trainer like me, because we don't train crazy Malinois that have been bred to like, rip the throat out of somebody. We aren't in the armed forces or canine unit. I personally don't specialize in aggression cases.



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And people throw stones at me for these reasons like, that makes me less than, or not as good as. And the truth is, you wouldn't go to your gynecologist and get livid with her for her lack of understanding of neurosurgery, would you? We are all specialists. But that doesn't mean we're stupid people.

And there's an inference that somebody like me could never train a high drive Malinois because I'm just an agility trainer. And when you have that bias, you lose the opportunity to learn. And so, let's clear the air and let's assume if I had an interest in training dangerous dogs, I absolutely could train dangerous dogs.

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I have an interest in helping all dogs throughout the world. That means dogs who are trying to fit in as somebody's pet. I have an interest in helping those dogs live their best life ever and helping those people live their best life ever. And my bias is we all live our best lives when we think the best of others.

We live our best lives when we're looking to have our dogs live their best life and the training we give them. It is training that chooses to have compassion, consent, and yes, efficacy as lead criteria to the decisions that we make. And so, I'm hoping we can have this conversation that you could leave me comments that definitely can be biased, but it's possible to be biased and not be unkind.

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As a late, great John Wooden used to say, "We can disagree without the need to be disagreeable." So let me share first some of the data that I gathered in looking at the use of electric collars. First, the term electric collars covers a lot of different collars.

There's people who have electric fence for their dog that the dogs will get an uncomfortable aversive, beep then a shock, electric voltage that will hit them if they attempt to go across this barrier. So, electric fences are going to be grouped into the data that I'm going to be sharing.

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Bark collars that may give off a noise, may give off a spray, may give off just a sound if a dog barks. They're grouped into the data I'm going to share. And training collars. So, collars that, from what I've gathered, there's all different brands, but training collars, remote collars, some people call them shock collars.

They're collars that deliver an electrical current on a scale. So, 1 might be something that the dog can't feel, but they could probably hear, because dogs have amazing sense of hearing. So, most collars go from a 1 to a 99 or a 1 to 127. I think that's really important to know for what I'm going to tell you down the road here.

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Some collars just deliver vibration or noise and some of them have alternating currents. Some of them are like more of a prickle. Some of them actually create a contraction in the muscle that the animal can't actually move.

So, there's all different types of electric collars and what I've found, wow, are there all different types of trainers using these electric collars. And that's why off the top I said, "You guys got to get your shit together." And let me share with you why those of you in my camp, we got to hope they get their shit together.



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Because every year, almost a quarter of a billion dollars is spent on people buying electric collars. Now, we've got to assume that last year's purchasers aren't going out and buying a new one every year. So, with the price of an electric collar going anywhere from a hundred dollars up to \$500, you've got— and I think the ones that have like the tracker, the GPS on them, they might even be more.

But with \$200 million a year at a minimum in just United States and Canada, that's a lot of electric collars being sold and there's no criteria. You can go to the pet store and grab an electric collar, you can order it online, which 30% of them are bought online, no education required.

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Therefore, let's guesstimate the percentage of electric collars that are used humanely versus the percentage that are used in an emotional response to a dog's behavior. And why I say 'you've got to get your shit together' is because the more that that grows—and, believe it or not, many people, when I posted on social media, I was looking for information on e-collar trainers—wow, did that fill my DMs.

Whew. When I posted that question, people said, "Oh, I thought they aren't sold anymore?" and yes, in some countries they are banned, but in North America, 10% per year growth in that market of electric collar. So yes, they are growing in popularity.

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And so, what happens is the more the uneducated are using these collars, the more the outrage for the collars will grow and the more likely that they will be legislated to be banned as they are in other countries. And let me tell you, I've said this before publicly, I have mixed emotions about this. I would be all for [banning electric collars](#) to save one dog the misery of an emotional use of an uneducated person just slapping it on there.

As I read this week in social media, a friend of mine who is a fellow dog trainer shared a post where somebody with a 13 week old Golden Retriever was asking for help on getting her [puppy to stop nipping](#) her family, should she go to an electric collar.

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It seemed like the next logical step. So, an uneducated pet owner, just my puppy is nipping. Wow. Big surprise there. I'm just going to slap an electric collar on. That's why I say you got to get your shit together because if you want to use these tools, you've got to regulate your own industry before somebody regulates it for you by banning the collars.

Why do I think banning the collars might be a bad thing? The only reason I see it as a potential bad thing is because that's a slippery slope. It's like breed bans. I believe that's just the first step in maybe down the road they don't allow us to put any collar or any leash on a dog. If you're going to own a dog, you have to have them be free roaming and just have them in a fenced in area, and you can't take them for a walk.

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So, you think, I'm kidding, but once we start legislating control of what people can and cannot choose to buy, that's the slippery slope that's created. Now, I'm not saying I'm for use of electric collars. I absolutely am not.

What is the biggest reason I'm not? Well, there's two. I've been training dogs professionally for 30 years. I have trained a lot of very strong dogs.



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My Jack Russell Terriers I purchased from lines from England that were [only used for hunting](#), the kind of dogs that would go down a hole. Some of the relatives died hunting because they wouldn't come out of a hole. They had that much focus and drive, an intent for what they were bred to do.

I've also bred Border Collies that once they get into the lock eye stuck, it's very difficult to change their mind about anything. But yet I've had a great deal of success with both breeds without the use of an electric collar. So, I feel anything that I want to train my dogs to do, I can train at a level that people would describe as nothing more than excellence.

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Anything I would set my mind to train a dog to do, I know I can train with excellence without the use of any tools that's going to stop them, prevent them, or use an aversive to get them to do what I want. So, I know that's possible for me, and I also know it's possible for anybody.

So that's why I would love for people to do away with electric collars. But I would love for us to get there by communicating, by not having this division of camps. Because I feel there's a lot to learn from each other.

And I'm not saying I want to know how to use an electric collar, I don't. But I know that just as sure as I know that there's great dog trainers on my side of the fence that anybody who uses an electric collar can learn from, I'm sure the reverse is true.

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So, what did I find when I was looking through these videos? I found some trainers that show an amazing understanding of conditioning. The effort that I put into [conditioning a head halter](#) before I ever put it on a dog, which sometimes might take me weeks or months before the dog loves the sight of it and loves to wear it.

Some elite trainers put that much effort into their dogs loving the sight and the use of an electric collar. And you might say, "How is that possible?" It is possible. You can condition a dog to love anything, so it is possible. But that is very, very few trainers.

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Now, I get it. A lot of great trainers aren't on social media, so I'm never going to see their videos. I get that. But from the trainers that I observed, that's what I found. There are some that are brilliant. There are those that say you need to slap that electric collar on your dog and get them doing a recall with it.

And they, what they call titrate the stem in that they start low, and they gradually increase it till they get the effect that they want from the dog. And I didn't look at anybody that had less than 50,000 followers on YouTube. So, there's a lot of people spreading some really bad advice.

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So, one trainer said he rarely uses it over a nine, rarely to never with his own dogs would he ever go over a nine. So, he said a human wouldn't even feel it at 15. And I did find an expose on electric collars, and he put it on himself, and he said, "Truthfully, I can't feel anything until it got to a nine."

Then he kind of felt it, and at 15 he said it still didn't bother him. And when he got to a 35, he said it was unbearable, and he had to stop. So, the collar he was testing on went up to 99 channels, or I don't know, the dial of intensity. And the trainer, he said his went up to 127, from 1 to 127.



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Now, he did as many trainers said that a dog's neck is far more sensitive, it has more nerve endings than a human's arm or a human's neck. So, a dog will feel it sooner than a human, which is why he said with his own dogs, he can start at a six and he rarely has to go over a nine, and most of his training is done below a nine.

Instantly I said, "Why does it have to go to 127 then?" If a dog can be trained on something up to a nine, why? But then I found trainers in discussions with what they called stubborn dogs, that you had to use two collars, both of them at 127, and sometimes you even had to put an electric collar on the tail.

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I think we can all agree at some point this is called abuse, isn't it? Trying not to be judgmental. But that's a question. That's a question. And please, in the comments, if you're on my side of the fence, do not get abusive to the people who are trying to work through the use of an electric collar. I want us not to be disagreeable.

I also found people who said the only way to train is with a dog on a leash. And again, a fellow with a lot of followers had a, what I would call an eight or nine month old Shepherd puppy, put the electric collar on, started walking, got it up to a 15, the dog would pull and wasn't responding. Got it up to a 25, and the dog was responding and then he walked and didn't pat, didn't praise, didn't reinforce in any way and said, "Oh, good. There's a distraction up there. We'll go over there."

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Okay, so I'm saying there are some good dog trainers using e-collars, but there are far, far, far more that are not. And so, if we had gun laws that 90% of the people using a gun were using it irresponsibly, incorrectly, and emotionally, do you not think we'd have to do something about that?

I get it. Guns can kill and electric collars can't. But there's still misuse or mis-abuse of tools. And here's another thing I go back to. Now, this is true for all dog trainers. Skinner said the number one biggest reinforcement for any animal in this world, people, dogs, dolphins, is absolute control over their environment.

And that's why I train the way I do. That's why I think [consent is so important](#). That's why involving the dog in every step of training I think is important.

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But I also wonder, what kind of dopamine release do you get when you can stop an animal in its tracks with a button? How does that reinforce the button holder? And maybe that's part of why it becomes such an important dog training tool to people.

Now, I think the opposite is too, I love when my dogs figure out a behavior. I love when I'm walking in the field and I see a deer and I just say, "[lie down](#)" and my dogs from anywhere around just drop. I love that they do that, but they're doing it voluntarily.

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There has never been a collar pop, any kind of physical correction to make them do it. So, I get it. I love to see a dog working harmoniously with me, but I've got to wonder what kind of stimulation the button pusher is getting when they can control an animal that previously it appeared like they couldn't control. These are all questions that I had.



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Here's what I did see, in the vast majority of these trainers, I get it not all of the best trainers are online, but the vast majority of trainers, they had very, very, very little foundation for that dog of how to be correct before they were told they were wrong.

When I say very, very little, I probably spend months and months creating a knee jerk reaction for my dog to want to do the right thing, whether it be a recall, whether it be drop, when you're 300 feet away from me in the field and you see a deer, whether it be a brilliant blistering, all out running contact and you hit, I work the nuances of [the layers of learning](#) to the degree that the dog doesn't want to do it wrong.

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I didn't see that in the training. So, here's where I'm going next. I would love for the divide between all dog trainers to be minimized because I believe inclusivity is where we all benefit. We don't have to train the exact same way for us to have conversations about dog training. So, I will be contacting some of what I consider to be the more elite trainers that are using an electric collar.

I want to have a conversation about reinforcement. I want to have a conversation about those foundational layers. I want to have a conversation that, you know, maybe it's Pollyanna of me to think that somebody on that side at the top, a really well-respected electric collar trainer is going to do what I did in 1996.

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They're going to say, "I know how to get these results using an electric collar. I'm going to do a deeper dive into the use of reinforcement that doesn't involve the negative reinforcement of using an electric collar. I'm going to do a deeper dive to see how I can get the same results without that collar."

So, for me, I'm going to see if anybody wants to talk to me. Now, they might not, because they might want to say, "Well, I'll talk to you about reinforcement as long as I can talk to you about the use of my electric collar." I have no interest. You know there is things that I don't want to waste space in my brain for.

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I don't know how an Uzi works, nor do I want to know how an Uzi works. I don't know how some people can pack for a trip in one suitcase, one carry-on suitcase for a 10 day trip. It's mind-boggling to me, but I don't want to know because I am a creature of comfort.

There's things I don't want to know about, and at the age of 60, almost 64, I know I don't need to know that to live my best life, but I'm hoping I'll find elite dog trainers that are willing to sit down and have conversations about foundation training and about the use of reinforcement in their world.

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I'd love to keep this conversation happening over on [my YouTube page](#), in the comment section, but I'm pleading with you if there's anything that I said in this episode that was offensive, it was not intentional. I'm coming from a place of curiosity in an effort to help us all bridge that gap, so we don't get legislated, and tools aren't outlawed.

I'd love to see the use of some of these tools to just fade away organically because we all have up level our understanding of how best to reach our dogs. I'll see you next time right here on Shaped by Dog.





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Resources:

[Podcast Episode 202: Getting A Happy Well Behaved Dog With The ABCs Of Dog Training](#)

[Podcast Episode 214: England Banned Shock Collars, Here's Why That Could Be Sad News](#)

[Podcast Episode 234: How To Stop Puppy Biting: Avoid Mistakes With Susan Garrett's Backup Plan](#)

[Podcast Episode 232: Canine Predatory Motor Sequence: Understand Your Dog's Prey Drive To Enrich Your Life Together](#)

[Podcast Episode 40: Using A Head Halter On A Dog, Why My Approach Is So Different](#)

[Podcast Episode 106: Consent In Dog Training: The Misuse, Misunderstanding And Misapplication](#)

[Podcast Episode 145: 10 Ways To Teach A Dog To Lay Down And How To Shape It Without Luring](#)

[Podcast Episode 21: The 5 Critical Dog Training Layers for Confidence with Anything](#)

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About Susan

A world-leading educator of dog trainers, Susan is also one of the most successful agility competitors of the last three decades. She has won multiple Gold Medals at National or World Championship events with every dog she has ever owned over the past 30 years. Susan was one of the very first dog trainers to share knowledge online when she opened her "Clicker Dogs" website many years ago. Susan has helped hundreds of thousands of people enjoy a great relationship with their dogs through her workshops and keynote speaking around the world, award winning books, DVDs, magazine articles, blog posts, podcasts, free dog training and dog agility video series, and online dog training programs.



A natural teacher and an entertaining speaker, Susan is world renowned for her dog training knowledge and practical application of that knowledge. Her understanding of how to apply science-based learning principles to both competitive and family pet dog training has been pivotal in changing how dogs are trained.

Susan is now helping many thousands of dog owners in 82 countries have the best relationship possible with their dogs. The real joy for her comes from bringing confidence to dogs and their owner through playful interactions and relationship building games that are grounded firmly in the science of how animals learn.



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