



Position Statement Training Methods - Canines Animal-Assisted Services Sector

Introduction

The Animal-Assisted Services Sector (the Sector) is a rapidly growing and emerging sector.

Animal Therapies Ltd (ATL) is a national health promotion charity and the leading Australian organisation for the Animal-Assisted Services Sector, including Assistance Animal Services.

ATL's charitable purpose is to advance the understanding, acceptance and accessibility of animal-assisted services. ATL connects the most vulnerable and disadvantaged, with animal-assisted services, making a difference to individuals and families across Australia who would otherwise fall through the cracks with no other way of accessing support.

Animal-assisted services may help a recipient to become more self-reliant, to thrive and to improve their wellbeing by providing tools to help prevent or manage mental illness, disability, disease and suffering.

Animal-assisted services are delivered by professionals with a diverse range of experience, expertise, and training methods, working with a variety of animal species.

Purpose of Statement

Worldwide, ATL acknowledges the beneficial role that animals play, in the health and wellbeing of humans.

ATL established its Code of Ethics (ATL, 2021) to protect the wellbeing of all humans and animals involved in the Animal-Assisted Services Sector. The Code describes a set of overarching ethical principles in line with ATL's purpose, vision and values – values including:

*Transparency, Health, Equality, Respect, Animal Welfare & Wellbeing,
Partnerships, Yielding Positive Outcomes.*

The ATL Conduct Standards (ATL, 2023) provide a framework for applying these core values, principles, and standards to guide providers delivering animal assisted services with animals, clients, colleagues, and the broader community.

Statement Principles

ATL acknowledges dogs are sentient beings that are capable of feeling positive and negative emotional states that matter to them. These include pleasure, happiness, fear and anxiety.

ATL advocates the use of the 'Five Domains' model (Mellor et al. 2020) as a framework to inform all of the aspects of dog management, and not only their training. Dogs should have a positive welfare state and a 'life worth living' and not simply the absence of negative welfare states. This model also affirms that both physical and mental health are important to welfare.

ATL believes the needs of the dog must not be compromised by meeting the needs of people. Where there is a conflict then the needs of the dog must have equal weight to humans and it is our moral responsibility to ensure their welfare at all times.

While this Position Statement is focussed on the training of dogs working in Animal-Assisted Services, we also highlight the importance of selecting dogs with an appropriate temperament for the role, and the management of these dogs at all times, for example being provided with adequate rest periods and space where they can be isolated when working for longer periods of time.

When training therapy and assistance dogs, ATL supports the use of force free, positive reinforcement (e.g., treats, verbal and physical praise, toys) in combination with negative punishment (e.g., turning your back to remove attention when a puppy jumps to reduce jumping).

ATL actively rejects the use of aversive physical, psychological and coercive methods (e.g. prong or shock/electronic collars, alpha rolls). ATL does not recommend the use of negative reinforcement, when an animal learns to perform a behaviour in order to avoid or remove something which is unpleasant. Teaching using negative reinforcement requires providing a stimulus to an animal that is unpleasant enough not to be ignored.

ATL's decision not to support aversive training methods is made to protect the welfare of animals, and to protect the wellbeing of human clients (e.g., observing punishment and negative training techniques may be triggering or distressing for clients who have experienced or witnessed trauma, abuse or violence themselves).

ATL affirms the importance and value of animal wellbeing:

Training methods and equipment used in the training and management of animals working in animal-assisted services must be free from causing distress, pain, fear, or intimidation in the animal.

ATL require animal-assisted service providers to allow the animals they work with to have agency (being the ability to actively choose to engage, or not engage, in goal directed behaviours).

The South Australian and ACT Governments (Dog & Cat Management Board, 2018 and ACT Government, 2020) have clarified their legal and policy positions, requiring assistance animal trainers and assessors seeking government accreditation to only use *force free* training and assessment methods and equipment.

ATL recognises that research is ongoing, and that terminology changes with new knowledge and practice. Animals are now recognised as sentient beings who should be treated with respect and compassion. Words such as *obedience* and *command* suggest that training is about controlling animals, rather than working with them in a partnership.

The Australian Capital Territory (ACT) Assistance Animal Accreditation Framework (2020), defines ACT Government's wellbeing and welfare position:

Force-free training, also known as positive or reward-based training, uses positive reinforcement to encourage wanted behaviours and to discourage unwanted behaviours. Rewards may take the form of praise, treats, playtime, petting or other methods of encouragement.

By using force-free training, a relationship of trust and respect is built between the dog and handler. Force-free training has been recommended by assistance animal organisations, is supported by research, and supports animal welfare outcomes for assistance animals.

Balanced training methods must not be used on assistance animals or assistance animals in training. Fundamentally no force should be used and the use of choke chains or pain inducing collars, yelling, hitting or any method involving pain or intimidation is not permitted.

Assistance Dogs International (ADI) and International Guide Dog Federation (IGDF) have also released a joint position statement acknowledging:

We recognise our dogs as co-partners and accept our moral responsibility to meet their physical, psychological, and emotional needs, both as individuals and within their role as working dogs.” (ADI & IGDF, 2023).

Leading organisations such as the Pet Professional Guild Australia and Delta Institute, advocate for positive rewards-based training as an imperative.

Effective animal training procedures lay the foundation for an animal’s healthy socialisation and training, and helps prevent behaviour problems (PPGA, no date).

Delta Strongly believes dogs benefit from appropriate management and consistent and clear positive reward-based training methods. There have been many studies which demonstrated that the use of this type of training achieves effective learning and reduces stress to both the dog and owner (Delta Institute, 2016).

Internationally, groups such as the American Veterinary Society of Animal Behaviour (AVSAB, 2021) recommend that only reward-based training methods are used for all dog training. The Australian Veterinary Association (AVA, 2021) state that “punishment and negative reinforcement should not be used in attempts to change the behaviour of dogs. Training of dogs is best achieved through positive reinforcement”.

ATL urges all participants across the Animal-Assisted Services Sector to embrace and make positive change for the better.

This Position Statement has been prepared following a series of key stakeholder consultations including a workshop held on the 21 June 2023 at Brisbane Airport Conference Centre. Animal Therapies Ltd acknowledges the following contributors and supporters in the development of the ATL Position Statement on Animal Training Methods - Canines.

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