

DOG TALK LLC (Training and Wellness)

A LOOK AT APPLYING BASIC LEARNING THEORY TO DOG TRAINING

There are two main principles for dog-friendly training. Give something to get more of a behavior you want. Take something away to stop a behavior you don't like.

Positive Reinforcement (+R): If you want your dog to repeat a behavior more frequently, reward that behavior.

Negative Punishment (-P): If you want your dog to repeat a behavior less frequently, remove any reward or perceived award for the behavior. This should happen rarely - focus on reinforcement.

Access to anything interesting to the dog is a reinforcer, good, bad or indifferent

Think of positive and negative like addition/subtraction. The counterparts to +R and -P are negative reinforcement (take away an aversive - something painful or unpleasant to the dog - as a reward). Positive punishment (present the dog with something painful or unpleasant for doing something you do not like).

Always ask yourself, is this going to create a trusting relationship? When teach your dog, always ask yourself, "Is this improving my relationship with my dog or is it harming it?"

"Positive training" usually uses positive reinforcement and negative punishment exclusively, and, very rarely uses the other two techniques, even with aversives that are not painful, just unpleasant (like time-outs or startling noises). Slip chains, choke or prong collars may not be considered, by many trainers/behaviorists as positive training. They may be looked at as "balanced training". What they don't know is that a combination of aversive corrections and positive reinforcements is the least effective way to teach. It is not necessary either. Why positive? The reason that many trainers prefer to use +R and -P instead of the alternatives is that working with rewards is much more fun, for the human and the dog, than aversives like choke chains.

Does it work? Definitely! Positive trainers have successfully trained all sorts of competition dogs, from obedience to agility to tracking. In fact, clicker trained dogs are usually ready for the obedience ring and agility competitions much faster than dogs trained with leash corrections. Pet dogs everywhere have also benefited from trainers who use these no-force methods.

Let's explore +R and -P in more detail. **Positive Reinforcement is anything that your dog likes.** I refer to it as **life rewards** too. Here is a sample list of reinforcers for some of our dogs:

- Dinner Time (AM & PM) Doggy Diner
- Healthy Treats doled out for good behavior
- Cheese

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- Toys – each dog has their favorite (Jolly Balls, Kong (preferably stuffed and smear with peanut butter), Frisbees, solid stuffies, knotted ropes with balls)
- Petting & massage by me or anyone
- Freedom to go outside in a safe, fenced yard
- Freedom to jump on the couch or other furniture to be with me
- Chase games - I run away, he chases
- Putting on the leash (if we're inside) – because we make it pleasant
- Praise (YES, Smiles, Ear Massage)
- Chasing squirrels and chipmunks
- Jumping up to lick our faces
- Chew bones – like beef marrow – safe dental chews
- There are more, again, what I call life rewards that create an enthusiastic relationship with my dog. I would add training to this, in increments, 10 – 15 minutes at a time, with the anticipation something delicious or game of ball or frisbee retrieve. Often, I hide things and have them find it.

Not all reinforcers for my dog are things that I want them to have access to. Prevention and Management are key to preventing this. Not all the items on this list are always reinforcers. For example, cuddling is not necessarily reinforcing, but it sure is calming for both of us. That's good enough for me.

Each dog is an individual, and at different stages/ages of their lives. One is more cautious in unfamiliar situations, then warms up. The other walks into a gaggle of children w/o a care.

The focus of the story is to find out what motivates your dog and what you find acceptable. Make a list of high-ranking motivations (one to three). It's easy. Use them to your advantage for joyful easy training that is integrated into daily living and learning.

Okay, now you motivators, so teach the behavior using a clicker or marker word (www.clickertraining.com). Once the dog knows what you want, continue to motivate him to do the behavior on cue by using one of the rewards.

If your dog knows the cue, you don't have to reward every single time (praise is good, smile or thumbs up). Save jackpot rewards for best behaviors. Make yourself interesting!

Important: Unless a dog is in a dangerous situation, loose, crossed a busy street, do not use bribes. It is confusing for the dog. A solid STAY is better than a bribe. A fearful or stressed out dog who normally responds to you may not in this situation. Safety is important.

Food / Treats as Lures: The dog performs the behavior and then she is presented with a treat and good down, or good sit. Using food and healthy treats is to get the dog excited and to show them how to perform the behavior you want like watch-me, sit, down, stay, come. Eventually, the lure is faded and the treat is then only used to promptly reward good behaviors, WHEN they offered to you PROMPTLY.

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Negative Punishment: In general, we should set our dogs up for success. If you don't think your dog will respond to your cue, don't give it. If you are not present in the moment, focused on your dog, don't waste your energy.

Work at a level where that is successful (sit/stay walk away a foot, then two, three, etc.). Gradually, add distractions or distance or whatever makes the task more difficult for your dog. For example: Leave-It, dog may be in a sit or down/stay and you roll a ball 10 feet away.

To keep your dog from jumping, teach a solid sit. To me this is like humans asking, "May I please?"

Positive trainers are not permissive, they don't risk traumatizing their dogs!
The focus is on a trusting relationship.

Sometimes we do need to punish a behavior, because he is doing something that is dangerous to himself or others. Threatening a dog creates fear, but it doesn't teach the dog what you want them to do.

With negative punishment, we take away something that the dog likes: attention, an expected treat, freedom in space (time-outs), walk-away, and the list goes on. Example: Let's say your dog, Quin, barks at you for attention. What do you do?

Negatively punish his barking. He barks, you turn around and leave the room, not allowing him to follow (crate, baby gate). Or he barks and you look away. By removing the expected reward (attention), the barking will eventually stop. This is time to (timing) to reward the "quiet".

We know today that dogs who are stressed out do not learn well. Dogs who enjoy training, respond well. Waiting for the dog to "think" and offer a "behavior" like sit or "quiet" after three or four barks at a doorbell, works best.

Sometimes behaviors are self-reinforcing. Sometimes, we dog parents reinforce unwanted behaviors. Children and teens, do this, due to lack of supervision or education about the consequences for the dog. They reward dogs with attention or treats for doing things like jumping, chewing, and even growling.

Supervision, and being proactive about where our dog is and what is happening is important for both the dog and others.

Again, when you do any sort of training with your dog, ask yourself, "Is this improving or harming my relationship with my dog?" If it is harming the relationship, stop. That's why we use positive reinforcement and negative punishment. Sure, the other methods often (but not always) work, but why risk the relationship with our dogs? ***Enjoy the Journey!***