

The Four Possibilities of Operant Conditioning in a Nutshell – Maureen Ross, MA

Behavior scientist [B.F. Skinner](#) developed the following Operant Conditioning Principles in the 1950's. He asserted that they were applicable to all living things with a central nervous system. You decide, but know that most trainers / behaviorists use one or all of these at some point in training dogs, AND, so do parents with children.

To clarify for those who, like me, can trip over the definitions, any knowledge is empowering. In everyday living and learning with our dogs, I doubt very much that the dog cares what we call it as long as it works and they get something they want, while pleasing us!

By applying these techniques that are taught in Psyche 101 classes, you can creatively, with awareness, better understand when teaching your dog do to what s/he is mentally and physically capable of. Be mindful that like children, our dogs are very individual. Not one approach works for all. My favorite approach that I believe is most pleasurable and effective is Positive Reinforcement (PR).

1. **Positive Reinforcement (PR):** The dog's behavior creates a positive consequence. Reinforcement (i.e. "reward") will increase the behavior. For example, when your dog sits, you feed him a treat. His behavior – sitting – made something good happen. As a result, your dog is more likely to offer to sit again, so the *behavior increases*. It is pleasant, quick and can be pleasantly integrated into everyday living.
2. **Positive Punishment (PP):** Involves the presentation of a bad consequence when the response is performed. For example, you say, "sit", your dog lies down. You jerk him onto his feet. This may or may not decrease the likelihood of a good response in the future. Another example: your dog jumps on you and you knee him in the chest, hard. He gets off. His behavior – jumping up – made something bad happen; something was added – your knee in the chest. Your dog is more likely to think twice before jumping on you again – but maybe not. Positive punishment can work, but dogs who are positively punished may learn to fear the punisher, can become aggressive, may shut down in training, and are often reluctant to offer new behaviors for fear of being punished.
3. **Negative Punishment (NP):** The dog's behavior makes something good go away – removal of a good consequence. *Negative means something is taken away, punishment means the behavior decreases.* Back to our jumping up example. When your dog jumps up on you, you turn your back on him and walk away. As long as she keeps jumping up -- you keep leaving. She wants to greet you; you are taking "you" away until she offers you a "sit." Follow-up with a positive reinforcement -- *his behavior of sitting made something good happen – you paid attention to him.*
4. **Negative Reinforcement:** The dog's behavior makes something bad go away – removal of a bad consequence. Something is taken away and reinforcement increases the behavior (any behavior). Example – shock collars to teach a dog to come when called. Call the dog and push the button causing the dog to experience an unpleasant sensation, ranging from low to high in intensity, until the dog has returned to the trainer. When the dog reaches the trainer, the button is released. The faster the dog returns, the quicker the shock stops. Positive trainers may use a limited amount of gentle negative reinforcement in the form of mild physical pressure, but generally consider shock collar training to be unacceptable. When in doubt, try the shock on yourself first.

We all like little tables to make things easier to absorb. Here is one for PR/PP/NP/NR:

		ACTION	
		Present	Take Away
STIMULUS	GOOD	Positive Reinforcement Present something good; Behavior is more likely.	Negative Reinforcement Take away something good; Behavior is less likely.
	BAD	Positive Punishment Present something bad; Behavior is less likely.	Negative reinforcement; Take away something bad; Behavior is more likely.

Punishment, whether positive or negative, causes the behavior to be less likely. Punishment can be treacherous to relationships. To be used effectively, it must have an impact. Timing needs to be prompt. If it doesn't work after two or three trials, STOP. You will create more serious issues with the dog like fear biting, aggression, beaten spirit, learned helplessness, anxiety and depression. The lack of trust and well-being are not worth the egotistical challenge.

OPERANT CONDITIONING (BF Skinner's ABC's --- request, response, reward): Picking up your dog's leash for a walk may create an excited response from your dog to go for a walk. Doggy Diner time will do the same. The behavior of coming to you and sitting is rewarded with a walk or treat (something the dog loves). OC is based on A. antecedent (something happens), B. behavior (dog offers one) and C. consequence (can be good or bad).

CLASSICAL CONDITIONING (PAVLOV's Salivating Dogs): This can have a major impact on behavior depending on how badly a dog wants something. Suppose you love pizza and you haven't eaten for 2-days. Your friend walks in with a pizza, but offers you \$100 dollars not to eat any. What do you want more, the money or the pizza? You begin salivating (visual and olfactory). That pizza smells good and it's VEGGIE. Either decision, this is what Pavlov's salivating dogs were conditioned too. They would begin salivating the moment they saw the "food" person coming. The reflexes are involuntary.

HABITUATION: Habituation is a decrease in response to a stimulus after repeated presentations. For example, a novel sound in your environment, such as a new ring tone, may initially draw your attention or even become distracting. After you become accustomed to this sound, you pay less attention to the noise and your response to the sound will diminish. This diminished response is habituation. The ability to stop reacting to meaningful stimuli is habituation. Anything that occurs repeatedly may lead to habituation (i.e. doorbell rings 24 times in a row and dog stops barking after the 6th ring).

ORIENTING RESPONSE: If someone walks into the room, you would probably look. Dogs will do this every time a new dog enters the training room, park, house or pack. If it occurs a number of times, chances are the dog will begin to ignore it. Your emotional response / reaction can help to redirect the dog to a more calm response (i.e. barking, turn around, shush or sit). This should be firm, but not punishing.

LEARNED IRRELEVANCE: A dog will stop paying attention to a stimulus or request if it has no meaningful consequence. Novices (new puppy owners) will oftentimes use the word come or sit multiple times without teaching the behavior. The dog simply learns to tune-out what is not relevant or meaningful.