

"Unleashing" the Power of Positive Training

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Dogs everywhere are benefiting from the insight that punishment and correction don't have to be a required part of training. Training can be fun for owners and dogs alike without losing any aspect of control or precision. It's a matter of relying on your brain and your imagination more than physical strength or training aids -- even equipment as common as a leash and choke chain.

What would help you enjoy your dog even more than you already do now? Is it knowing more commands? Better attention to you and your family? More reliable responses when you call him or her? Maybe your dog is wonderful except for one or two behavioral problems that you wish would go away (barking, jumping, chewing, digging, housesoiling, etc.). Whatever your situation, positive reinforcement training gives YOU the power to bring out the best in your dog.

The basic idea of positive reinforcement is that all animals (including people!) will repeat behaviors that lead to positive experiences and will soon give up behaviors that do not lead to positive experiences. This proven behavioral science principle is particularly applicable to dogs. If dogs were gamblers, they would bet on the long shots every time. This is why punishment is often ineffectual. Even if your dog understands the cause and effect of the punishment, he's still hoping that he won't get caught this time! Because it's difficult to be 100% consistent with punishing, every so often your dog does get away with whatever it was you didn't want him to do, and much to your frustration, the problem continues.

The good news is that you can use this knowledge of dog behavior to your advantage. Forget about punishing for what you DON'T want your dog to do and start using your energy to teach him what you WANT him to do instead. If you are able to show him a better option, your dog will give up the undesired behaviors on his own.

Let's take the example of teaching your dog to walk politely by your left side, referred to as "heeling." The traditional approach is to start off with the dog on a leash with a choke chain. When the dog moves too far ahead of the trainer, the trainer responds by jerking on the leash to tighten the choke chain. This punishment tells the dog he did the wrong thing by pulling ahead.

The positive training method would be to start without even using a leash. (Of course, if you are not in an enclosed area, put a leash on your dog for safety, but ignore it as an enforcement tool -- you don't need it!) Encourage your dog to follow you as you back away from him. When you have his attention, turn around 180 degrees to the right so that you are both facing forward, walking in the same direction. Look down to your left, and there's your dog -- in the "Heel" position! As soon as he's in the right spot, surprise him with a treat. If he stays walking nicely by your side, give him another treat, reinforcing every single step at first. Continue this process until your dog catches on that fun things are likely to happen when he's by your left side. Your dog will choose to be by your side more often than ever before. Once this happens, you can shape his heeling to your desired level of precision by controlling how often you offer the treats as reinforcement and raising your expectations as to how many steps your dog has to go before getting reinforced.



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Weaning your dog off the treats is where the "magic" of positive reinforcement comes in. Known scientifically as "a variable schedule of intermittent reinforcement," this is the way that you improve your dog's responses and teach him to try harder. Think of the lure of slot machines in a casino and contrast them with soda machines. When you put money in a soda machine and nothing comes out, you either walk away and make a note not to use that machine again or you get annoyed and hit the machine to jolt the can free, right? This is because you expect the machine to deliver a soda every single time - just like your dog will expect a treat every time if you don't eventually use intermittent reinforcement.

Slot machines are the ultimate example of a variable schedule of intermittent reinforcement. People put money in and sometimes they get a little back, sometimes they get nothing and, once in a while, they hit a jackpot! Give your training a burst of power by reinforcing your dog's behavior with an unexpected jackpot every so often. Your long shot gambler will keep up that behavior for a long time just hoping for another jackpot!

Using treats properly will get your training off to a great start, but don't forget about your most powerful tool - your attention. You can have a tremendous impact on your dog's behavior just by when you choose to give him or her your attention. Most dogs are masters at getting our attention on their terms because we usually don't consciously use our attention as a reinforcement tool. In fact, we often contribute to behavior problems in our dogs by unintentionally reinforcing the wrong behaviors. If your dog barks, and you stop what you're doing to pet him or reassure him, what did he just learn? Of course, he learned that barking is a good way to get your attention, but did you know that it can be the same result if you had reprimanded him? To dogs, getting scolded may be better than no attention at all!

Once you start thinking in terms of positive reinforcement, you will see many opportunities to shape the behaviors you WANT by being selective in when and how you give your dog the gift of your attention. This will free you from having to police your dog as much by putting more responsibility for good behavior on your dog. Do this by actively looking for times when your dog is behaving in a way you like and want to encourage. If he's sitting or lying down quietly, surprise him with a back scratch or a treat or take him for a walk right then. Remember that your dog's behavior is governed by the "laws" of positive reinforcement -- he will repeat the behaviors that lead to good times. Your job is to show him what those behaviors are and how he can earn your attention. Your dog will grow in confidence, and you will enjoy having a well-mannered dog.

There are several good books and videos to show you more about positive reinforcement and how dogs learn. Two of the best books are currently out in paperback: *Don't Shoot the Dog!* by Karen Pryor and *The Culture Clash* by Jean Donaldson.



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Before you get started, keep in mind that positive reinforcement is extremely relationship-based. It's more a way of life and a way of communicating with your dog than it is a shortcut training "technique." If you are interested in having your dog be a part of your family, you will love training him or her with positive reinforcement.

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