

Dog Training Theory

Introduction

The single most important fact you can learn to help you train your dog is that:-

Rewarded behaviours are more likely to happen again.

The most important rule that you can apply when training your dog, (or handling any animal for that matter), is **First do no harm.**

Training dogs is all about manipulating the consequences of the dogs actions, most of which are investigative/inquisitive/play seeking/food seeking or experimental. We manipulate the consequences of his action by reward or positive reinforcement, so the required behaviour is more likely to happen again.

Dog training or behaviour terms

Operant Conditioning – is the modification of the incidence of behaviour. We like to think of this as the dog operating on his environment to make it work for him, so he manipulates us to gain his reward, by sitting for example as he has learnt that when he sits we supply yummy treats.

Classical conditioning – or putting behaviours on cue. This is the pairing of things that are meaningless to the dog with something of intrinsic value. Saying ‘sit’ is meaningless for the dog, until we pair the sit with the bottom hitting the ground, and the food reward to make the sit relevant. Us putting on sandals is meaningless to dogs, until it becomes paired with taking the dog for a walk.

Lures or prompts – As they mean. We can use food as a lure to guide the dog into the position we require. A prompt is a signal that generally elicits a response, example clapping your thighs and calling usually will prompt a puppy to come to you. This recall response though is a response only, not an understanding of what you are saying, and if the puppy receives no feed back from his response, eg no praise or food reward, then his response will fade from no reinforcement. So a prompt can cause an action, whether that action is repeated depends upon whether the response was rewarded or not.

Prompts vs Cues – We prefer to use ‘cue’, as command is too militaristic. We are trying to train a puppy to want to do as he is asked, not have to obey a command or else. Compliance should be happy and willing, not forced or coerced. A prompt suggests an action, a cue is taught (often by pairing with a prompt), so the cue ‘sit’ is given as puppy assumes the position we are luring him in to, and because the action is rewarded which increases the chance that the behaviour will happen again, puppy learns that the word ‘sit’ means put your bottom on the ground in order to receive your reward.

Positive Reinforcement – Providing something your puppy deems important, in exchange or in response to his correct behaviour. (Good thing starts) Or rewarding or his actions.

Negative Punishment – The only sort of punishment we like you to use. The taking away of something your puppy deems to be of value, in response to his incorrect behaviour. (Good thing ends) Example removing your appendage and your attention when puppy play bites too hard.

Negative reinforcement – We try not to do. This is taking away something that our puppy would rather not have anyway, like pain, when his response is correct. Example stopping pulling on his neck when he walks nicely beside us. (Bad thing ends) We try not to do this as firstly it means **we** commence doing something unpleasant to our puppy, in order that we may remove the unpleasantness when we receive the correct response. Like torture used in interrogation, when the subject being tortured gives away information, we stop inflicting the pain. Not nice is it? AND usually it is done when the puppy doesn't understand the request in the first place, which makes it even worse.

Positive punishment - As it says. Actively inflicting pain on the dog in the name of dog training. Entirely unnecessary and cruel. And again bad trainers do this when the puppy doesn't yet understand what IS required of him. AND it is usually applied inappropriately, eg hours after the offence, when puppy has long forgotten what it was that he had done. PLUS it never affords the dog the chance of making a correct choice in order to avoid the punishment. (Bad thing starts).

Primary reinforcement – Something of value for the dog, food for example. Something the dogs need for their survival.

Secondary reinforcement – This is a reinforcement that is actually taught to the dog. Saying 'yes' when paired with food, the pup learns that 'yes' means he has earned a reward. Throwing a ball for a dog can be a secondary reinforcer.

Praise is a secondary reinforcer, praise and petting are **NOT** naturally reinforcing for dogs, they become reinforcing as they are paired with good things happening, eg dinner 4 times a day.

Marker, or Bridge – Saying 'yes' is also a marker, meaning it marks the good behaviour, or a bridge, which bridges the interval between the good behaviour and the reward, so the pup actually knows what the reward is for. In practice if your puppy is doing a stay for example, instead of rewarding your return to the pup, you can say 'yes' while you are still at a distance. This 'yes' marks the staying behaviour as a rewardable behaviour, then bridges the gap between your praise and the food reward coming. So your puppy will really understand that staying while you are at a distance is what the rewardable behaviour is, not your return.

Life rewards – Not all rewards need to be food related. Anything that your dog likes can be a reward, playing, squeaky toys, tug games. Life rewards are those that all dogs love, going for a walk for example. Going and sniffing who's been here and what they've said. Generally praise is a low grade reinforcer initially, until it has been paired enough times with primary rewards, and puppy understands that patting and praise mean he has done the correct thing.

Reinforcement Schedules – When learning a behaviour we use a high reinforcement schedule, as we want to give our puppy lots of feedback that he is doing the right thing. Lots of rewards will speed learning.

Variable reinforcement schedule – As it sounds. Once puppy has learned a behaviour then varying the time or the rate or the type of reinforcement works best at keeping the behaviour tuned. No reinforcement and the behaviour will diminish in frequency. (No pay packet why bother working?)

Jackpot – A term giving to a super reward, for a super response from your puppy. It usually is lots of excitement, about 5 treats to really sink in, then best of all a big fun game and end of training session for a bit, perhaps an immediate walk.

Using variable reinforcement and jackpot, we keep puppy guessing, he never knows quite what is coming, and usually they try really hard for the big one. Using a one response one reward ratio for an already learned behaviour is generally very boring for puppy, and they often work half-heartedly as they know what is coming, and it doesn't have quite the same meaning as a surprise. It can also be a big problem the first time you don't supply the reward, when the reward is expected and not forthcoming, some puppies may then give up.

The analogy here is similar to putting money into a coffee machine. A second lot of money only goes in to a non-functional machine if you are desperate. You expect to be paid by the machine with a coffee in return for your money.

Using the jackpot and variable reinforcement schedule, think about how much money people put into poker machines, they never quite know when they will strike the big one.

The other advantage of a variable reinforcement schedule, is that you can be selective about what you pay. The fastest sit gets rewarded. The fastest recall. The straightest down. The best response. So our puppy learns to try harder and harder to win the big one. We do praise and acknowledge all correct responses, but a pat on the head or a 'good boy' is okay for a less than usual response, EXCEPT in distracting situations we should lower our criteria and expect less until our puppy gets older.