

The Choice is Yours.

Understanding the Power of Choice for Off Leash Control.

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Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory was my favourite movie as a kid. The scene I loved the most was the first time the group of winners enters Wonka's world. I would get myself so excited about the choices I would make were I actually there. What I would eat first, where I would go. It truly was a land of pure imagination.

Life, whether make believe or not, is filled with choices. Every day we all make hundreds of decisions - some small, others life changing. How to dress, what to eat, where to live, how many times to press snooze. Our lives quite simply are a sum of the decisions we make and the consequences these choices bring us. The same is true for our dogs.

While Wonka may be the things of imagination for us, I can't help but think the real world is, or at least holds the potential to be, Wonka World Canine Style. I mean think of it – stale pee to sniff, half eaten burgers to eat, long grass to run through, cats to chase and - if you are really lucky - dead things to roll in. Pure canine paradise. Dogs live in an incredibly reinforcement rich world.

Well, they would... if it wasn't for us. “Don't sniff THAT!”, “Don't roll IN THAT!” “Don't eat THAT”, “Leave that ALONE!” “AGH, don't lick yourself THERE!” I mean think about it – most of the time our dogs must think we are real party poopers.

The truth is that many activities our dogs consider lollipops are deemed unacceptable by humans. Trouble is often what we want and need them to do equates to nothing much more than boiled potato. Like us, our dogs have to behave in ways that they would rather not. While we would often love the opportunity to let our dogs go and do whatever they desire, it is our job to keep them safe and legal. Good training is all about making them want to eat their veggies. Creating a dog that actually wants to listen to you over the call of the wild sounds like the stuff of fairy tales for many of us. However, while the choices a dog makes in a given situation will always be governed by many different factors, looking at the information science gives us on the mechanics of choice gives us an insight into understanding our dog's behaviour and at the same time provides tools for changing or maintaining the choices that they are currently making. While individuals come with different motivational levels, the choices all dogs make can be weighted in our favor with good training decisions.

So what does it mean to choose? In its totality it means doing one thing at the sake of another. Choice always means giving up something in order to gain something else, if only in the short term. Sometimes choices are easy. Sometimes they are hard. Should I have a coffee or tea? Should I leave my husband of ten years? You get the picture. Our history of what has worked for us in the past is one of the things

that make choice easier or harder. It is our experience that drives the choices we make here and now.

One of the first things we learn about training is what happens when we stop reinforcing a behaviour. It dies. It's a pretty clear choice, and one based on survival strategy – no animal will choose to waste time or energy doing what doesn't work. It's a no brainer.

For a behaviour to be alive there must be a reinforcement history maintaining it. There is no other way. The stronger the reinforcement history, the stronger the behaviour and the easier it will then be for the animal to make that choice again, as it knows it will pay off.

A strong reinforcement history isn't just a long reinforcement history, although a behaviour that has been reinforced thousands of times is obviously going to count for something! Reinforcement histories also take into account quality and quantity of reinforcement, how quickly the reinforcement comes and just what the other options were around at the time.

We are all well acquainted with reinforcement schedules and their impact on our dog's behaviour. We know that consistent reinforcement builds behaviour quickly. We understand that behaviour on an intermittent schedule is more resilient to extinction. This information comes from researchers working with one animal with one option. Press a lever or don't press a lever type of thing. While this is really important for the discovery and understanding of the basic principles of behavioural patterns, our dogs are usually asked to respond to us in environments that are much more complex than a laboratory. More often than not we want them to do what we ask when there are other options for reinforcement. To really be able to get the best control in the real world all of these opportunities for reinforcement must be taken into account.

In the laboratory, scientists study why animals choose to perform one behaviour over another by using concurrent schedules of reinforcement. Concurrent schedules involve two or more schedules of reinforcement being available for the animal to freely distribute behaviour between. The animal has a choice what to spend it's behavioural dollar on. A pigeon may have a chance to peck a blue key which gives one particular reinforcement schedule and a red one which gives them another. Not surprisingly, these experiments show us that when all other things are equal, an animal will spend more time and energy on the choice that provides the most opportunities to earn reinforcement; smart survival strategy. This pattern of responding so closely matches the reinforcement that is available that it is referred to as the Matching Law.

While this result may seem obvious, we often seem to miss grasping the importance of this information. Many training books advise that once a behaviour has been learned we should move from a continuous schedule of reinforcement to an intermittent schedule of reinforcement. This advice comes from the understanding that this creates a behaviour that is 'stronger' and less resilient to extinction. Trouble is that this is an application of the basic principles of learning in a complex situation.

One of the main arguments against positive reinforcement training is that it is unrealistic in the real world where there are so many competing reinforcers and where, quite frankly, a piece of cheese for many dogs will not cut it. This argument leads many to believe that we must punish unwanted behaviour in these situations. While it is true that the real world gives us a lot more factors to take into consideration, what is not true is that laboratory findings give us no help whatsoever. An understanding of the findings of the study of choice behaviour help us to identify these competing reinforcers and modify what we are offering to make it worthwhile for our dog's to choose us. One of the aspects of reinforcement training that many people miss in the real world is the relationship that the reinforcement on offer from us has with the reinforcement that is on offer from the environment. Day after day, year after year, behaviour after behaviour we are often continually saying to our dog "You can't have what you want" by calling them to come to us and thus away from the good thing. Even if we pop a bit of sausage down their throat every time (and who among us does that?) we create a situation where we are giving them something less (for most dogs) than what the environment is offering. Over time this creates a no win situation. Eventually we are going to see the intensity and speed of response slow, as our dog's behaviour - as it always does – gives us a mirror into their mind and tells us that the choice to come to us and away from the lollipop is becoming more difficult.

This observation is scientifically sound. The psychologist David Premack has shown us that the consequences for any behaviour can be thought of as behaviours themselves. Most of us are aware of the Premack principle I'm sure, but I'm not sure that we see just how often it is at work for our dogs. It is always there. When we usually think of reinforcement training we think of a relationship between a behaviour and a stimuli – a chunk of sausage or a toy for instance. By thinking instead about what sort of behavioural opportunities the gaining of this stimulus brings our dogs, we can begin to see that some behaviours will act as reinforcers for other behaviours and vice versa. If you want to chase a rabbit more than eating liver but you return to your mamma calling you and get liver, this behaviour (the eating of the liver) is actually going to weaken coming when called in the presence of the rabbit.

When we flip it around like this, we can see that when we use a lesser reinforcer to pay our dogs for ignoring a higher valued reinforcer, we are building in the dog's mind an understanding that listening to us and responding to our cues ultimately means: "if you listen to me you will get less than what you would if you didn't". This creates a real conflict for the dog, and over time weakens the response we see. It gives them reason to doubt that what we are asking them to do is the best choice on offer at the time.

By identifying the reinforcer that is maintaining an undesired behaviour, we actually gain a great tool. Where safe and appropriate, competing reinforcers can be used as reinforcers for behaviour that is desired. A competing reinforcer is something that the dog desires that has the potential to make it 'disobey' you. Cats and rabbits are great examples. The sudden appearance of a rabbit for most dogs off lead is a

discriminative stimulus not to come when called. Chasing a rabbit and coming when called are kind of mutually exclusive.

We can harness the power of that 'competing reinforcer' by teaching the dog a cue which allows the dog access to it, and training him that any other time he tries to access his efforts will be unsuccessful, we create a situation where we gain control of the dog's behaviour in it's presence. What this gives us is not only a dog that has a great deal of self control, as his reinforcement history tells him the only way to gain the reinforcer is through us, but also a dog that now sees everything good in life as coming from us – not as a party pooper! Imagine what that does for your relationship! You want to go chase the rabbit in the field? You get to do it by coming back to heel position and sitting by Mum. Interested in running over and meeting that other dog on the oval? Come back and give Dad eye contact. The more situations we can say to our dogs; “That good thing that you want to experience can only be yours if you come and check in with me”, the more control we have and, most importantly, our dogs begin to learn that everything good in life comes through you.

So how do we do it? The first step is to identify what your dog loves to spend his behavioural dollar on when it's just up to him. Each dog needs to be seen as an individual and their personal preferences and hierarchy of reinforcers taken into account. Being aware of the reinforcers that are on offer in various contexts and what that means for an individual is vital for success. What reinforcers are available at any given moment are always going to influence the strength of others. We see this all the time in class when we hear, “Well, he worked really well for the cheese at home, but now all he wants to do is play with that sexy female shepherd!” We know that the value of the cheese as a reinforcer at home is high, but in the presence of other dogs, and the chance to play, it goes way, way down. Context is important. It tells the dog what's on offer and affects his preferences. By observing our dogs and taking note of what they naturally spend their time doing when we are not interfering we get the all-important information of what that individual dog finds reinforcing. Brilliant.

Next we need to establish stimulus control for accessing the behaviour. Depending on the history of the dog, this is going to either be pretty easy or make you pull out your hair! Obviously a young puppy that comes to you with no history of learning that it is worthwhile to ignore you is our best option, but even an adult dog with a 'history of offense' can be helped. The use of a long line is a godsend here to prevent the dog from learning he can respond to what the environment delivers without you. By placing a young dog on line you block any behaviour of ignoring you from working. If a rabbit turns up for instance, if rabbit chasing is what you are working on, you let the lead do all the work. No “NOING!, AH – AHING or BAHHHING!” You just gradually put pressure on the lead so that the pup comes to a gradual stop. As soon as it looks back at you with that “What the?” look on his face, you make woopee, calling him back. When he is there, you can choose to give him a cookie or not, but the important thing is to give the behaviour of going after the rabbit a name and run with him to where you last saw the Wascally Wabbit and let him have some fun. Gradually, over time, you will afford the dog more and more freedom, always

looking at what his behaviour is telling him about how easy his choice is to choose you.

Many of our clients would love their dog's to have better self-control, and through the implementation of the Premack principle in exercises such as the one outlined here, we can help our clients achieve this goal. In order to learn about the value of self-control, our dogs must be trained to perform operant behaviours in the presence of desired activities that reflect this state. Dogs that have a history of self-control 'paying off' are obviously going to be in a much stronger position to exhibit behaviours that constitute self-control when the need arises.

Learning behaviours such as "wait", "stay" and "leave it" are all common training goals in a beginner dog training class, which reflect the need for a dog to be able to resist immediate temptation for delayed reward. Like all other behaviours, self-control involves building the behaviour up bit by bit. But again, the behaviour is always going to be a fragile one if the dog only even gets a lesser reinforcer for ignoring another one. Think about it. What are you teaching your dog when you hand him a bit of dried liver for coming away from a big game with his canine buddies? You may just see a slower response next time you call him in the same situation, if you see one at all.

The truth of the matter is that the environment does not have to be our enemy. If we are savvy trainers we can use all the wonderful opportunities to reinforce desired behaviour and at the same time start to build in our dogs the understanding that the best thing they can do in any situation is to listen to us. The environment may put a rabbit under their nose, but if they have learned that the only way to access it and have a fun time chasing it is through you, they will look to you for the cue. We can condition our dogs to check in with us regularly when off lead because they have learned that this often means that there will be a wonderful surprise coming their way. While we can carry all the food and toys around with us for all of our dog's life, this limited view of 'reinforcement' means that we create a competition for our dog's attention and behaviour between the environment and ourselves. Trust me, the environment will always win. But when we open up our eyes to see the pure magic that the world can be for our dogs we become their own personal Willy Wonka.