

The Devil in the Details.

Positive reinforcement training has come a long way in the past ten years. Once only used in labs to study behaviour or at marine mammal parks to get dolphins, whales and seals to perform nowadays positive reinforcement training is used widely by professional animal trainers and new pet owners alike.

Positive reinforcement training provides desired consequences for desired behaviour. The dog sits - the dog gets it's ball thrown. The dog comes when he is called – the dog gets a cookie. That sort of thing. First studied by a guy called Edward Thorndike and later made really famous by another guy called B.F. Skinner, it has been shown both in laboratory settings and various animal training situations in the real world to be the most powerful way to effect long term changes in behaviour.

If you have trained a dog with us for any length of time you will no doubt know the fundamental rule of positive reinforcement training – **reinforcement strengthens behaviour**. Simply put, if your dog does something you like – say sits when greeting a stranger, lies quietly at the door while someone walks past the house, comes running to you when you call them – providing something that the dog likes will make that behaviour more likely to occur again in the future. Woo hoo. If you want to be a good dog trainer, mother, father, boss, co-worker or friend – in fact if you just plain want to have good relationships with anyone you meet, you should tattoo that rule into your mind. Because not only does reinforcement strengthen behaviour, but it also greatly influences the way the animal or person receiving the reinforcement feels about you because you become associated with the good stuff you give – very cool.

Unfortunately though, it seems that not all see the incredible power in positive reinforcement. Some owners claim it simply doesn't work for their dog, some claim it's bribery, some tell you that you still have to punish the behaviour you don't want, others want the dog to work to please them. If there is so much evidence about the huge benefits of positive reinforcement training, how can some people still question it's merits and use?

After over twelve years of learning about the science of behaviour modification (the fancy name for training) and putting the theory into practice by training all sorts of animals from budgies to seals, I am convinced one of the biggest problems for humans learning how to train with positive reinforcement is our very nature. It seems that human beings are naturally very good at punishing behaviours we don't like and ignoring the ones we do. It is a rare person who looks for good behaviour and rewards it naturally. Most of us naturally pay attention to others when they are doing things that we don't like and ignore them when they are behaving well. Think about a dog barking. How often do people pay attention to a barking dog – calling the dog's name, yelling at it to shut up,

coming to look at what the dog is barking, patting the dog and telling it it's ok are all common reactions to the largely unwanted behaviour of barking. But what do we all do when the dog is lying quietly? Most of us ignore it. Altering the way you react to the behaviours of others so that you are always on the look out for behaviour you like and reinforcing them and ignoring the behaviour you don't like is a very hard lesson to learn. Without learning it however, you will never be effective at using reinforcement in your training.

Another factor that a trainer using positive reinforcement must learn is good timing. The studies that have been done in the laboratory show us the importance of timing when it comes to delivering a reward. If you are teaching your dog to sit with food, the treat has to come as soon as the dog sits. If your dog's butt hits the ground and you take your sweet time getting your food out of your pocket and as you hand it to the dog the dog stands up, you have reinforced standing up - not sitting. Don't be surprised then, when your dog starts acting like a regular jack in the box. Sit, stand, sit, stand... Whatever the reinforcer is, it has to come at the exact time the behaviour you want more of is occurring. Most people do not have good timing and all good animal trainers have developed the skill with practice. Using a special sound that the dog has learnt to associate with good things (a clicker, a whistle, a special word) can help increase our ability to pin point the behaviour we like by making the sound exactly when the behaviour happens. Feeding your dog treats willy-nilly with no correlation to a particular behaviour isn't positive reinforcement training, it's just feeding your dog. When your training 'isn't working' look at your timing, because more often than not, that's where the problem will be.

The way people see their dogs often plays a big part in how good they will be at using positive reinforcement training. Often people carry around baggage with them that gets in the way of effective training, like thinking their dog owes it to them to behave. "I rescued him from the pound and he repays me by attacking the neighbours cat! He is so ungrateful!" is a relatively common type of thinking amongst dog owners who don't understand dog behaviour or training. The belief that dogs work to please us comes from the long history of aversive training where dogs were praised for doing the right thing and strangled on a check chain for doing the wrong thing. Science has shown us that dogs form associations quickly when two things happen together consistently and we now understand that rather than working for the praise and to 'please their owner', the dogs were working to avoid being strangled. The praise was excellent information to the dog, not about their owners internal state, but that they had successfully avoided being choked because if their owner was praising them, they never got strangled. Avoiding being hurt is just as reinforcing as gaining something you want, so it works to strengthen behaviour. The trouble with it is that it can also make you scared, nervous, timid, aggressive and depressed. Either way the dog learns because the basic law of learning is in play – reinforcement strengthens behaviour. This idea has also fuelled the thought that using rewards (specifically food) in training is bribery. Admittedly, food or any desired object like a toy used

incorrectly can amount to nothing more than bribery, but when training is done properly the reward comes after the behaviour has occurred and does not need to be dangled in front of the dog in order for it to perform. The fact of the matter is that without reinforcement behaviour doesn't occur. The only real choice you have is to what kind of reinforcement you want to use. You can use negative reinforcement, which involved you taking away something the dog doesn't like such as pain, discomfort or mental pressure (which means you have to present the pain, discomfort or mental pressure in order to take it away). Or you can use positive reinforcement and provide the dog with something he does like such as a treat, a throw of the ball, the chance to run free or to play with you or some mates when he behaves in a desired way. That's the only way you can train anything, by controlling reinforcers. Without ever hearing an angry "NO!" "AH-AH!" or "BAAHHHH!" thousands of animals all around the world have been trained to perform a multitude of behaviours consistently on cue. Next time you yell at your dog for what he's doing wrong, point the finger directly back at yourself. The more "Nos" you have to yell, the less you have trained your dog.

Research shows us that the behaviour of all animals, from a flat worm to a human being is best controlled with positive reinforcement. It's power and effectiveness for doing this when applied properly, is beyond doubt. Often times people seem to find it easier to turn the finger out and point at anything other than themselves as the reason things may not be going to plan. Unfortunately though, even though blaming the dog or the training method may make you feel better, it doesn't get you very far. On the other hand, taking responsibility to understand the important details of reinforcement training and how to implement the proven principals on which positive reinforcement is based, makes you feel good and goes a very long way to giving you all the power you will ever need to train your dog to do anything it is physically capable of performing. That's the power of positive reinforcement training.

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