

Positive Method Dog Training--Why to Use It and How It Works

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If you have a new holiday puppy in your home, adopted a dog-in-need-of-a-family, or have a family dog you'd like to get on the training bandwagon this new-year, be sure to consider positive method dog training. It's not only dog-friendly, but the most effective method for training behaviors that are most likely to last a lifetime.

Here's what some highly respected experts in the field of behavior have learned about your dog and positive reinforcement training.

The American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior (AVSAB) "is concerned with the recent re-emergence of dominance theory and forcing dogs and other animals into submission as a means of preventing and correcting behavior problems." (Position Statement www.AVSABonline.org). The AVSAB recommends that veterinarians refer to trainers who focus on reinforcing desirable behaviors avoiding the reinforcement of undesirable behaviors. True leadership calmly and confidently teaches your dog what to do.

How Does Positive Reinforcement Work?

Simply put, desirable behaviors are rewarded and, as such, those behaviors are likely to be repeated, whereas, undesirable behaviors are managed or ignored and are likely to fade away.

Positive reinforcement trainers get the behaviors they want from their dogs because they control and manipulate the resources their dogs want. It's as simple as that. You have the food, the treats, the affection, the eye-contact, the praise, the leash and the tennis ball!

For example, if your dog wants to get petted, teach your dog to sit in order to receive the reinforcement of petting. Sit for petting is one of the most useful tricks I teach.

It Works? Says Who?

Dr. Ian Dunbar, along with Karen Pryor, and Gary Wilkes, are pioneer behaviorists and innovators who helped make it possible for pet parents to learn to train their dogs in a scientifically sound as well as a kind and loving manner.

Pryor, one of the first animal behaviorists to recognize that companion dogs could be effectively trained using positive methods alone, was a dolphin trainer.

These animal trainers are, by virtue of the size and power of their trainees, required to use expert skill and creativity in training some of the largest animals on the planet to perform tricks without the use of force, intimidation or positive punishment. Indeed, "Trainers build strong and rewarding relationships with the animals based on a history of positive and stimulating interaction." The positive only training methods used to train dolphins and killer whales at Sea

World are readily available on their website. Just Google Sea World training. The Sea World website offers a Train Your Pet section using positive method only pet training.

The positive method, as part of the operant quadrant, was first demonstrated in research by B.F. Skinner and presented in his renowned treatise, *The Behavior of Organisms* (Skinner, 1938). Marian and Keller Breland developed and promoted their use, but it wasn't until the early 1990's, with the popularity of clicker training that the method came out of the science lab and community, and into our living rooms to help us train our companion animals.

What to Look for in a Trainer

In the July 2006 issue of the *Journal for Veterinary Behavior*, entitled, *Good Trainers: How to Identify One...*, the consensus of veterinary authors recommend that in looking for a good training class or private lesson, you ask, "Are the dogs happy" and "Are the clients participating and happy?"

The method a good trainer uses to stop unwanted behavior "consists of asking for a substitute behavior or humane restraint if the dog is in peril but they should never include physical punishment." The veterinary behaviorist asks, "Is the emphasis on good manners that are encouraged only by positive methods, (e.g., no hitting, no "pop and jerk", no "stringing up", no "hanging" of dogs, et cetera)?"

The *Journal* goes on to list, "Tools that should be avoided because they increase fear and anxiety: shock collars, electric collars, e-collars, static collars, prong collars, "correction" collars, choke collars, choke chains, sometimes euphemistically referred to as training collars. " Good tools to use are listed as : "treats, harnesses, head collars, praise and toys".

It states unequivocally, "Punishment makes animals more reactive, so it increases aggression and arousal".

The *Journal* asks it's veterinarians to examine a trainer's credentials and experience as well, checking for lecture and practical labs on learning theory and its application as well as continuing education certificates of completion held by the trainer being evaluated.

A 2008 study reviewed in the *Journal of Veterinary Behavior*, concludes there is "an association between a lower number of potentially undesirable behaviors reported in dogs trained without the use of punishment-based techniques".

Addressing the Arguments Against Positive Reinforcement Training

The main argument advanced against positive reinforcement training advanced is that training with food rewards is bad and makes a dog's good behavior contingent upon receipt of a food reward.

We know that all living things repeat behaviors that are rewarded, and because food is a powerful reinforcer to your dog, it is a highly effective tool in training and speeds learning. Preventing treat dependence, however, should be part and parcel of positive training and is certainly achievable when the following methods are employed to supplement the occasional food reward:

- Removing the lure
- Substituting food with affection or toys
- Providing real life reinforcements
- Linking behaviors
- Random reinforcement

Dr. Ian Dunbar, DVM and Ph.D., author of “Before and After Getting Your Puppy: The Positive Approach to Raising a Happy, Healthy and well-Behaved Dog” (2004) and puppy guru, speaks out on this subject in his New Year Newsletter at www.dogstardaily.com. His article entitled, Under Pressure: The Fall-out of Heavy-handed Training, asks, "Can you train your dog using harsh methods? It is possible, but the question is why would you choose that method? Why are more people questioning the use of food in training than questioning the do-it-or-else teaching style? You can always wean your dog off food rewards."

Another popular argument and misconception regarding positive reinforcement training is that positive means permissive. Not so. Positive method training routinely relies upon good management, boundaries, containment and teaches well-mannered self-control to your pup.

Next week: Using positive reinforcement methods to keep your dog from jumping up on you, your guests and strangers.

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