

Positive Training

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Positive motivational training is the embracing and application of the belief that dogs can and should be trained by the judicious use of rewards alone. It is 'positive' because something is added (rewards) and 'motivational' because the animal is encouraged to try lots of different behaviours to earn a desired reward.

It is not, the combined use of aversives and positives such as employed by many traditional trainers. Using food or a toy to 'motivate' a dog along with leash pops, jerk and pull techniques, verbal reprimands, scruff shakes and other physical manipulations is not in keeping with the philosophy of the true positive motivational trainer as described in this article. The single biggest difference between the two schools is the mind set of the trainer. While the traditional trainer looks to 'correct' undesired behaviour, the positive trainer looks only for what the dog is doing right.

How it works

The laws of animal learning tell us that "behaviour that is rewarded will be repeated". This is really all you need to know to successfully train a dog or any other animal. By controlling what happens immediately after a behaviour (the consequence) you can predict whether a behaviour will increase (through reinforcement) or decrease (through punishment). Positive trainers increase the behaviours they want by rewarding the dog with things it wants such as food, toys, games and social interactions (known as positive reinforcement). Unwanted behaviours are decreased by the removal of rewards such as ignoring, time out from training or feeding an unearned treat to another dog (known as negative punishment).

Reward or Reinforcement?

A reinforcer is by definition, anything which, when presented immediately after a behaviour, causes that behaviour to increase. For rewards to be effective reinforcers they must be:

- Related to a behaviour.
- Desired - in the dog's opinion not yours (many dogs would work for used tissues).
- Rationed or rare - if it is freely available why work for it? This is one reason why praise alone is often not a very effective reinforcer for pet dogs who may receive a great deal of 'sweet talk' in the course of their daily interactions - not necessarily contingent upon good behaviour.
- Variable and unpredictable - dogs love the element of surprise. Not knowing which reinforcer might appear or when is a more effective way to train than delivering predictable rewards at predictable intervals. Timed - presented within one second of a behaviour. This is not always practicable however the use of a 'bridge' such as a clicker between the behaviour and the reward, eliminates this problem.

The role of food in positive training

Most positive trainers like to use food as a reinforcer in training because:

- It is a primary reinforcer preferred by most dogs, needed by all.
- It is easy to use in fast succession allowing one to work quickly.
- It easily doubles as a lure in the early stages of learning.
- It can be used to classically condition other rewards such as toys, games and praise which are associated with it.
- It can be used to counter condition. negative associations with training, environments and other fear and stress related problems.



Making the most out of your dog's daily calorie intake

World renowned veterinarian and animal behaviourist Dr Ian Dunbar recommends throwing away your dogs food bowl for ever. Take the same amount of food he would be given for free everyday in his bowl and instead feed it bit by bit, contingent upon good behaviour. Train anything you want but make him work for his dinner just the way nature intended. Some advantages of feeding in this way are:

- It dispels the idea of 'spoiling' your dog with treats. Instead you are teaching him that nothing in life is free and that there are real benefits in pleasing you.
- There is no risk of unbalancing the dog's diet as you might with the excessive use of 'treat' foods.
- It is an effective boredom buster - you are more likely to spend time interacting with your dog when you see his food container is still 2/3 full! Your dog now gets a triple reward - food, attention from you and mental stimulation.
- Fussy eaters won't fill up on treats refusing dinner.
- Prevents problems of obesity caused by, unmonitored calorie intake.

Other Reinforcers'

Games of retrieve or tug are also high on the list of reinforcers. 'Life rewards' such as having the lead put on for a walk, opening doors to come in or go out or rides in the car can all be used to train everyday behaviours without the use of a primary reinforcer such as food. The important thing is to know what 'turns your dog on' and to make him work for these things rather than give them away for nothing.

Schedules of Reinforcement

Perhaps the most perplexing question in positive training is how often to reinforce your dog for the right behaviour. Here several general rules apply.

Continuous Reinforcement - every correct response receives a reward. This is the quickest way for an animal to learn a new behaviour.

Variable Reinforcement - is the most useful for strengthening and maintaining behaviours. An example would be to reward only every second or third sit and continuing to increase the number of sits required before earning a reward. In practice, trainers would not only insist on an increased number of sits between rewards but more importantly would choose only better (straighter, faster) sits to reward, there-by shaping the behaviour into a better performance.

The art of positive training lies in the skilful application of reinforcement schedules - withholding rewards just enough to make your dog try harder but not so much as to demotivate or discourage him. In general-a wide variety of rewards delivered unpredictably will ensure your dog stays eager to play the training game.

Shaping

It is important that whatever behaviour you wish to eventually train is broken down into small, easily achievable, component steps - this is known as 'shaping'. Each rewardable response along the way provides a unit of information which help the dog understand what you want. Every time your dog gets a step right, he has one more piece of the ultimate behaviour puzzle.

Management

This plays a major role in successful positive motivational training. The dog must be set up for success by whatever means possible so that there is always something for you to reward. For instance, if you want to teach your dog to 'come' in the dog park, attaching a drag line is a management technique that will ensure success. By holding the end of the drag line you prevent your dog from engaging in further exploration and socialisation (natural environmental rewards) instead of coming to you. A reward as soon as he reaches you completes the lesson that coming to you is always the best option.



Reinforcements - love'em or hate'em you can't train without 'em

Reinforcements may be either positive (applied) or negative (removed) - as long as it causes behaviour to increase, it is a reinforcer. For some reason, it is the application of positive reinforcers, particularly food which seems to deter many traditional trainers from adopting positive training methods. Traditional trainers most often employ the removal of the pressure of the check chain as their reinforcement of choice and they do so throughout the dog's life, even into the highest levels of training. If in doubt, watch a few trainers preparing to enter the UD ring and you will see the check chain being applied to reinforce heel position or attention. Yet the application of positive reinforcers such as treats or games has been misconstrued as being suitable only for beginning levels of training. How often have instructors at dog clubs been heard to say "you shouldn't still be using food in this class". They have confused the limited use of food, in sight as a lure, with the use of food after a behaviour as a reinforcement. In fact, the positive trainer reinforcing his dog with a treat or game prior to entering the obedience ring is applying the exact same principles of animal learning as the traditional trainers, except that his preferred choice of reinforcement is positive rather than negative. In both cases, a variable schedule of reinforcement (occasional treats or jerks) needs to be maintained throughout the life of the animal to prevent the behaviour from extinguishing. The suggestion that one method is 'spoiling' and the other is 'real' training is unjustified, moralistic claptrap. Behaviour must be reinforced to be maintained, it is simply a matter of personal choice whether you prefer to apply a hot dog or jerk a check chain.

Advantages of positive training techniques

- "In positive reinforcement training, the relationship between dog and owner is a partnership of mutual empowerment" (Pat Miller - The Power of Positive Dog Training 2001). The dog learns a way to control his environment by engaging in the behaviours you have selected to reward - a win/win situation for dog and handler.
- Dogs learn to enjoy training and the training environments as they represent opportunities for reinforcement.
- As positive training looks only to reward desired behaviour, there is no appropriate application for the use of scruff shakes, alpha rolls or shouting so often seen in correction based training methods. Your dog learns that you can be trusted to remain cool, calm, and emotionally consistent through all training sessions - truly a worthy 'Alpha'.
- Because training is such a positive, fun experience, which the dog wishes to engage in, 'time out' becomes the only punisher you need.
- In scientific terms, positive training classically conditions YOU as a secondary reinforcer to your dog. In plain language, YOU come to represent everything fun and good in your dog's life - a canine 'Santa' and as a result are rewarding in yourself.

Is Positive Training for You?

Positive training will never suit all dog handlers. You must first ask yourself why do I like dog training? What initially attracted me to dog training clubs and competitions? Some people enjoy the traditional 'man/master- dog/servant' relationship. They enjoy 'commanding' the dog and ensuring that it 'obeys'. For them traditional training will probably always be the preferred method and provided there is no cruelty involved, there is nothing wrong with that.

Positive training reflects more of a teacher/student relationship. Teachers design the curriculum and lead the lessons, but to maintain a harmonious classroom there is give, take and respect on all sides. The attraction for these trainers is the communication between two different species. The ultimate goal for positive trainers is not ribbons on a wall or trophies in a cupboard, but the development of a unique relationship based on "authority without domination, love without subservience and respect without fear". **

Dogs are perfect at being dogs. They already know how to sit, stand, drop, speak, scent and retrieve. What they have to learn is what our words are for these behaviours and when, where and why they should perform them - this is our choice and therefore our responsibility to teach humanely.

Luckily, with positive motivational training this can be achieved in a way that is fast, efficient and fun for both our dogs and ourselves.

** (Quote taken from the 'Clicker Trainers Goal)

