

## HOW DOGS LEARN AND HOW TO CHOOSE A GOOD DOG TRAINER

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### WHERE DOES DOG TRAINING FIT INTO YOUR VETERINARY PRACTICE?

“We’re veterinarians – dog training isn’t our job...”  
Clients are going to have questions, however, and having the right answers is important.

- “What kind of collar should I use?”
- “Are choke collars okay?”
- “How about prong or shock collars?”
- “What do you think about the  $\alpha$ -roll?”
- “Hey, Doc – what do you think about the Dog Whisperer?”

This part of “your job” can be handled by a designated staff member or, you can refer. BUT – you need to know who to refer to!

- Dog trainer or animal behaviorist?
- Veterinary behaviorist?
- It’s important to know what’s out there
- What’s good
- What’s not so good...

### LEARNING

#### Classical Conditioning

- Pairs a stimulus with environmental events
- Animal learns about relations between stimuli and alters its behavior accordingly

#### Operant Conditioning

- Behavior occurs because it was previously instrumental in producing a certain consequence
- **Motivation** is VERY IMPORTANT!
  - Treats, praise, attention – Bribe? Paycheck? Raise?
- **Timing** is everything...
  - The reward should come within one second of the desired behavior
- **Consistency** is also very important
  - Especially in the beginning – The dog has to learn what is getting him what

#### OPERANT CONDITIONING – TERMS

- **Reinforcement** – The probability that the behavior will recur is **INCREASED**
- **Punishment** – The probability that the behavior will recur is **DECREASED**
- **Positive** – The Controlling Stimulus is present or occurs as a consequence of the response occurring
  - The response produces the stimulus which can be appetitive or aversive

- **Negative** – The Controlling Stimulus is absent or is removed as a consequence of the response occurring
  - The response eliminates or prevents the occurrence of the stimulus which can be appetitive or aversive:
    - Positive Reinforcement
    - Negative Reinforcement
    - Positive Punishment
    - Negative Punishment
- **Positive Reinforcement** – The probability that the behavior will recur **increases** as a consequence of the Controlling Stimulus being **present** or **occurring** immediately subsequent to the behavior
  - Example: ***If you do X and good things happen, keep doing X***
  - Say “sit” (Eliciting Stimulus) while holding a treat over a dog’s head
  - If the dog sits (Response), give it the treat (Controlling Stimulus)
  - If it does not sit, do not give the treat
- **Reinforcement Schedules**
  - **Continuous**: Dog gets a reward every time it offers desired behavior
    - Best way to learn new behavior
  - **Intermittent**: Dog gets a reward every 3<sup>rd</sup> time, 2<sup>nd</sup> time, 5<sup>th</sup> time, every time, etc.
    - Best way to maintain a behavior
    - Turns the dog into a gambler...
    - Doesn’t know when the treat is coming, but KNOWS that it is!
- **Negative Reinforcement** – The probability that the behavior will recur **increases** as a consequence of the Controlling Stimulus being **absent** or **removed** if the behavior occurs
  - Example: ***If you do X and bad things go away or stay away, keep doing X***
  - Dog training techniques using a jerking movement with a collar
  - Owner says “sit” and collar is jerked until animal sits
  - Dog learns to sit when owner says “sit” **before** the jerking happens
  - Dog is aggressive to children. The child is causing the dog pain. The dog growls and the child goes away.
  - ***The growling is negatively reinforced***
- **Positive Punishment** – Usually referred to as “Punishment.” The probability that the behavior will recur **decreases** as a consequence of the Controlling Stimulus **occurring** immediately subsequent to the behavior
  - Example: ***If you do X and bad things happen, stop doing X***

- Bark Collar: “If I bark, I get a gentle spray of nasty smelling citronella in my face, so I’m not going to bark”
- For **punishment** to be effective, **three conditions must be met:**
  - The punishment must be **immediate** (within 1 second)
  - The punishment must be **consistent** (every time)
  - The punishment must be **appropriate** for the individual animal (dog stops the behavior – isn’t afraid)

- **Negative Punishment** – Usually referred to as “Time Out.” The probability that the behavior will recur **decreases** as the consequence of the Controlling Stimulus being **absent** or **removed** if the behavior occurs
  - Example: ***If you do X and a good thing doesn’t happen or stops happening, don’t do X***
- **Flooding** – Term used for the deliberate exposure of the animal to a stimulus until the response extinguishes or the animal habituates
  - **Problems with Flooding**
    - Once a flooding session is initiated, exposure to the stimulus must continue until the response ceases, otherwise the behavior may be reinforced
    - Animals with strong fears may injure themselves, other animals or people in the vicinity, or damage their surroundings
- **Learned Helplessness** – Interference with the learning of new instrumental responses as a result of exposure to inescapable and unavoidable aversive simulation
  - Dog has learned that there is *no consequence to its behavior*
  - There is no benefit to trying to get away
  - Life is horrible...”

**CLINICAL RELEVANCE**

- Improper use of shock collars or invisible fences
  - The  $\alpha$ -roll - May inhibit future learning
- Animals with history of chronic, inescapable abuse
  - Withdrawn, abnormal behavior
  - Don’t seem to respond to rewards
  - Getting them “back” will take time...
- **Promote situations that cause the dog to be relaxed:**
  - Ears forward
  - Body and face loose
  - Focused on you
- **Avoid situations that cause the dog to be anxious or afraid:**
  - Ears back
  - Body and face tense
  - Eyes flicking away

- Licking lips
- Yawning
- Panting
- **Simple Training Techniques**
  - Reward behaviors you want - be clear and consistent
  - Ignore behaviors you don’t want - provide alternate desirable behavior
  - Sit/Stay/Relax

**Most owners can train their own dogs to do what they want.**

**TOP 10 RECOMMENDATIONS**

- A trainer who treats dogs and owners with respect
- A trainer who uses treat-based, positive-reinforcement techniques
- A trainer who uses a good-fitting harness, the Gentle Leader head collar, or other non-choking, non-shocking training collars
- A trainer who teaches the owner what to do and how to do it
- Classes where dogs and owners are having fun
- Classes where dogs and owners are learning new things
- A trainer who uses a variety of nonaversive techniques
- Training that is tailored to the individual dog
- A program that allows the dog to progress at its own speed and that isn’t forced into situations that he/she isn’t comfortable
- A trainer who applies basic learning theory correctly

**WHAT TO AVOID**

- A trainer who uses correction collars as a primary way to train (choke, prong, shock)
- A trainer who uses harsh/repeated commands
- A trainer who hits the dog with hands, leash, or feet
- A trainer who “hangs” the dog
- A trainer who takes the dog away to its own facility for “boot camp”
- A trainer who says that an owner is “loving too much” or is “being too soft”
- A class where dogs appear generally anxious
  - Ears back
  - Tail down
  - Panting
  - Lip-licking
  - Yawning
- Classes where owners appear generally anxious
- A trainer who follows a dominance-based training model

**CONCLUSION**

- **Look for a trainer who is certified**
- Certification Council for Pet Dog Trainers – CCPDT (See <http://www.ccpdt.org>)
- **Take time to visit various trainers**
- **Know when to refer**