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I Trained My Dog And He Still Won't Listen!

What Do I do Now?

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Chapter Two

Behavior 101

When I visit a new client for the first time, I give them a basic background about behavior as a foundation to get them thinking on the right track. There are a lot of myths about what works to modify behavior. Behavior modification is just a fancy term for getting a dog (or person) to change something they are doing. If you have taken psychology courses, some of this will sound very familiar. Just think of it as a refresher course on a very elementary level.

To begin, there are two things that will influence behavior. When making reference to behavior, one is referred to as reinforcement and the other is referred to as punishment. Breaking it down further, there is positive reinforcement and negative reinforcement and there is positive punishment and negative punishment. In a moment, I'll give you a simple definition of each one followed by an example of what each one might be. I say "might be" because one of the most common problems I encounter is that a person might think they are doing something to get rid of a problem when actually, they are making matters worse or vice versa, they might think they are reinforcing a behavior when, in reality, they are making their dog less reliable at that command. Let me explain more about this.

First, you need to understand that reinforcement or punishment is not defined by what you are doing to your dog. Rather, it is defined by how your actions affected the behavior you

are trying to have an influence on. It is very easy to fall into the trap where you think you are punishing your dog for something it did when in reality you are reinforcing that behavior. This problem exists in both directions. You might also think you are reinforcing something your dog just did, but in reality are punishing the behavior.

Sound confusing? It gets worse. Another related problem may rear its ugly head as well. You may be trying to punish one behavior and as a consequence, you punish something else accidentally that you want your dog to do. Without taking care to look at the whole picture of what you are doing, you might be undermining your efforts. This will become clearer as you keep reading. For now, just be aware that what you think you are doing isn't always being understood by your dog the same way. It's important to look at how your dog is reacting to what you're doing. This will help you in determining whether or not you should continue what you're doing. Someone once said that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again expecting to get a different result. If you feel like you've been going insane trying to train your dog, maybe you've fallen into this trap.

Here are two examples, where the result desired is not the result achieved. Let's say that Joe Dog Owner has a dog that barks excessively when in his yard. The neighbors are complaining and Joe realizes he needs to do something about it. Joe decides that every time his dog barks he is going to go outside and smack his dog hard on the nose (I do not recommend doing this). But because Joe's dog spends so much time outside alone he quickly figures out that barking gets Joe to come outside more often. As a result, Joe's dog begins to bark more instead of less. Joe thinks he is punishing the barking when in reality he is reinforcing it. The opposite response could have happened in this scenario as well. His dog may have stopped barking and in that case Joe's "cure" would have worked because his dog took Joe's remedy as he intended.

Here's another example on the other side of the fence. Mary Dog Lover has been teaching her dog to come to her when called in her house and yard. She has practiced it a lot and has a very high degree of reliability in that environment. Mary decides to take her dog to the local dog park to let it socialize and practice the "come" command. While at the park, Mary's dog finds some playmates its own age and begins to wrestle with these dogs and is having a grand ol' time. Mary decides to test her dog and calls her dog to come to her. Because she has practiced this a lot, her dog breaks away from playing and comes running over to her. Mary then makes her dog sit and tries to pet her dog. But while she is petting her dog it keeps moving its head in a way that suggests that Mary's dog is annoyed. The whole

time she is doing this, her dog is watching the other two dogs playing and doesn't take it's eyes off of them. Most likely, Mary just undermined her efforts to keep her dog coming to her with reliability. Mary should have noticed what she was doing was not rewarding to her dog at that moment. Most likely, it was a mild punishment for coming to her. If she had let her dog go back and play some more she would have used more freedom to socialize and play as a reward. In this case, additional freedom and a chance to play some more would be a much more appropriate reward than petting. However, if Mary's dog had been staring up at her, soaking up her petting with longing eyes, the reward would most likely have been taken as such.

So here are the basic definitions of the two types of reinforcement and the two types of punishments:

Positive Reinforcement: Something pleasant happens to the dog simultaneously or immediately following a behavior that strengthens the behavior and/or makes it more likely for the behavior to occur again in the future.

Negative Reinforcement: Something unpleasant happens to the dog simultaneously with a behavior that strengthens the behavior and/or makes it more likely for the behavior to occur again in the future.

Positive Punishment: Something unpleasant happens to the dog simultaneously or immediately following a behavior that weakens the behavior and/or makes it less likely for the behavior to occur again in the future.

Negative Punishment: Something pleasant or that matters to the dog at that moment is taken away simultaneously or immediately following a behavior that weakens the behavior or makes it less likely for the behavior to happen again in the future.

Don't worry if these don't all make sense yet. You don't need to be able to recite these definitions. Just understanding the concept of each should help to open new options to you in training your dog to listen. Let me give you some examples of each of these.

Positive reinforcement is something most people are familiar with. An example of

positive reinforcement might be giving your dog a treat, petting your dog or throwing their toy for them immediately after they sit, lay down, come or do anything else you might be teaching them to do. There are many things available for you to use as positive reinforcement.

Anything you have the ability to provide or deny access to that your dog places value on is a potential reward you can use for positive reinforcement. Things your dog might place a value on could be going on a walk, visiting other dogs or people, being allowed to smell the flowers, being granted permission to chase the resident squirrel up a tree or even being allowed to mark or lift his leg on a tree. One of your first jobs in learning how to get your dog to listen better is to identify what things your dog places value on. It is also helpful to know the basic order they might place them if they could write out a list for you. In other words, rank the rewards in their order of importance to your dog.

Negative reinforcement is something most people are familiar with as well, even if they don't know they are. Most often, negative reinforcement requires the use of some kind of tool in order to apply the negative reinforcement. A common tool most people are familiar with is the bit used in a horse's mouth for training and riding a horse. This tool, when the reins are pulled, applies pressure in the horse's mouth that facilitates getting the horse to respond in the desired way. As soon as the horse does what we want, such as turn or stop, the pressure is removed and the tool returns to a neutral state. Negative reinforcement tools can be very powerful. A horse may weigh a thousand pounds or more and can be easily controlled with this tool. In dog training, there are negative reinforcement tools regularly used to control a dog. One example is the head halter. Some of the common brands are the Gentle Leader and Halti. Head halters control a dog from under their jaw by connecting the head halter to a leash.

To give you a clear picture of how you might use a head halter, imagine you have your dog standing next to you and you have been having trouble getting your dog to sit. To use a head halter, you would give your command to sit and gently, but firmly, pull straight upward. Your dog's head is going to be pointing towards the sky and if you continue to pull upwards your dog is eventually going to try to get back down to the ground. Since their head and neck is being pulled in an upwardly direction the only thing they can put on the ground is their butt. The moment their butt hits the ground, you release the upward pull and the head halter returns to a neutral, slack position. Many trainers have been quick to employ the use of head halters in their courses. But as is the case with a horse, these tools don't always result in an animal that is responsive when the tool is removed later. Try riding a horse without its head

harness if you're brave and you'll see what I mean.

In my opinion, negative reinforcement tools are limited in their usefulness. In certain situations, such as when you are having difficulty getting your dog to do the desired behavior using any other method or if you're working with a dog that might bite if it feels provoked, they are very useful. In cases like these, the head halter may help you to teach what a command means or might help to keep you safer and in more control. But in my opinion, tools used for negative reinforcement beyond the point where the dog understands what the commands mean are primarily being used as management tools and such will need to be used forever to keep the animal under control in most cases. This is not necessarily a bad thing. Anything that helps control an otherwise uncontrollable dog is better than nothing. Head halters are not, in my opinion, tools that help much in teaching your dog to listen with reliability. In other words, if you use negative reinforcement to try and teach your dog to listen, you will probably find that in the absence of the tool, your dog resorts back to choosing on a case by case basis whether they will listen or not. This is not true with all dogs, but I find it to be true quite often.

I probably just upset a lot of head halter advocates with that last statement, but I regularly get clients who were trained to teach their dog to walk using a head halter. These same clients tell me that their dog won't walk calmly without it on. If your desired end result is to have your dog listen when they are on or off-leash, then you will probably need to employ other methods and tools to get the job done. Don't get me wrong here. I do occasionally employ the use of head halters in my training for use in situations like the ones I mentioned.

Other tools which can be used for negative reinforcement are choke chain collars, pinch collars, and electronic collars. These tools all can be used in a negative reinforcement manner, but they also have the ability to be used to carry out a positive punishment and are therefore more versatile. Head halters on the other hand cannot be used effectively to deliver a positive punishment without the potential for harm to your dog's neck. You should never yank abruptly on a head halter. You might tweak your dog's neck and give them a whiplash or even permanently injure your dog.

Next we come to positive punishment. Positive punishment, as the definition states, is when something unpleasant happens to the dog that weakens the behavior or makes it less likely to occur again. This is usually the first course of action people take when training or trying to solve a problem or get their dog to listen. If properly used, positive punishment can help in training your dog to listen with a high degree of reliability. But, if not used correctly it can undermine all your efforts. I'll explain more about how to use all four of the

reinforcements and punishments later. An example of positive punishment might be squirting your dog with water to stop them from barking at you. If your timing is very good, and the squirt comes immediately following the bark, and if your dog does not like getting squirt in the face, then you have just used positive punishment to weaken the behavior of your dog barking at you. If you continue to use this punishment, you should see the behavior diminish and eventually die out all together. However, if you do this and your timing is bad, your dog may not get the message at all. Or, if you have a dog that thinks its fun to get squirted in the face you would most likely be adding positive reinforcement and strengthening the barking behavior. The old fashioned spanking of a child when they behaved badly is an example of positive punishment.

Finally, we come to negative punishment. Negative punishment is probably the most underused and most misunderstood method to change behavior in a family dog. This could be because most people don't know how to use it or don't know what it is. Negative punishment is very effective in certain situations and completely useless in others. As the definition states, something the dog considers to be of value is taken away simultaneously or immediately following a behavior. This weakens the behavior or makes it less likely to happen in the future. One important point to understand is that the thing you take away needs to be of higher value than the reward your dog receives when they do the behavior. In other words, let's say you have a great treat in your hand and you ask your dog to sit when they are staring intensely at a cat on the lawn a few feet away. If your dog doesn't respond, you could try taking away the treat at that moment. But it will be useless to take the treat away unless your dog places a higher value on the treat than it does on possibly getting to chase the cat.

So what can you take away that is of value to your dog? Well, the first and most obvious thing we can take away is our attention. If you have a dog that jumps on you for attention and you immediately walk away the moment their front paws come off the ground, you would be using negative punishment. The message you would be sending to your dog is that jumping on you results in you taking your attention further away from them than it was immediately before the jump. Negative punishment works through the principle of extinction. Extinction is a term used to describe a behavior dying out because the reinforcement that was present is no longer there. Negative punishment works very well in cases where you are the reinforcement to the behavior.

Other things you can take away from your dog might be their freedom. Here's an

example. You have a dog that behaves like a crazy nut when they come into the house. The moment your dog goes wild you take your dog's freedom away by making them lay down and be still for a couple of minutes. When they have shown a little self-control, you give them their freedom back. If they go back to acting crazy, you take their freedom away again. If you repeat this over and over again, you will eventually get the message across that running around crazy results in a loss of freedom and will see your dog slowing down when they are in the house. You can also look at negative punishment from the perspective of taking your dog away from the thing it considers to be of value. Going back to the case of your dog staring at the cat on the lawn, when you ask him to sit and he ignores you, you take him further away from the cat. If he doesn't listen again, you take him even further away from the cat, and so on, until he listens. If you have to remove him from the view of the cat altogether that's what you do. Once he starts to listen again, you can bring him closer to the cat.

The one problem with negative punishment is that it does not always give the clearest message. I believe negative punishment works best when combined with one or more of the other reinforcements and punishments. In fact, that is really true about all of the reinforcements and punishments. If you can find a way to incorporate all of them in a training lesson, you will see very quick results. I'll give you an example of how this could be done in a situation where your dog jumps up on you to get you to pay attention to them.

Let's say you have just walked through your front door and your dog is running up to you to greet you. What you would like them to do is to greet you politely with a sit so you can say "hi" and pet them without them messing up your clothes. But instead of coming to you and sitting politely, they jump on you. What you could do is slip your hand under their collar (the type of collar doesn't matter) and immediately pull them upward and off of you. By pulling upward to a point where you can tell that they are uncomfortable, you have just used a positive punishment for jumping on you. You would then continue to hold their front paws off the ground an inch or so until you see them trying to sit. The entire time you are doing this, their back paws remain on the ground. You are not trying to hang the dog here. This might take a few seconds or even a minute the first time or two that you try it, but stay with it. By continuing to hold their front paws up until they decide to try and get back to the ground you would be using negative reinforcement to teach your dog to sit when they greet you. As soon as your dog is trying to sit, you will set their front paws down, but not until their butt goes down first. As soon as you set their front paws down, you start petting them gently on their head and ears. This is positive reinforcement for sitting. You would continue to pet them until

they stand up again which is usually very quickly the first couple of times you do this. The moment they stand up you take your hands off of them. This is negative punishment. You are removing your attention (petting) the moment they stop sitting. If your dog jumps on you again, repeat this every time until they begin greeting you with a sit. Amazingly, you usually only have to repeat this a few times before your dog starts to greet you by sitting first.

So there you have it, an example of how to use all of the reinforcements and punishments together. When you do this you will see there is a synergy not present when you focus on just using one reinforcement or punishment alone. It will take some practice and you may have to think a little to come up with ways to use them all, but the results you see will be amazing provided you are accurately assessing the way your dog is reacting to what you do.

The last thing you should know about punishments and reinforcements is that they are different in the way they need to be applied in order to be effective. Here again is a place where people undermine their efforts much of the time. You'll understand why in a moment.

Behavior research has generally concluded that positive reinforcement when applied in a manner that is variable and intermittent can actually be addictive. The main reason people become addicted to gambling is because the rewards in gambling are variable and intermittent. Variable refers to the reward itself changing in value. The reward could be small or the reward could be a huge jackpot. Intermittent refers to the frequency the reward is received. The person or dog doesn't know when the next reward will come. The combination of variable and intermittent reinforcement is powerful and when applied correctly can work well to strengthen a behavior.

The opposite is true about punishments. In order for punishments to be most effective, they need to occur with perfect consistency. This is especially true about behaviors that have been rewarded for an extended time. I am not talking about first time experiences here. I'll get to that later. What I'm talking about are behaviors that have been in place for a while. Understand first that if a behavior exists, there is reinforcement coming from somewhere. If reinforcement wasn't coming from somewhere, the behavior would not exist.

So if your dog is doing something that it gets pleasure from and you can make it an unpleasurable experience instead of a pleasurable one, the behavior should die out or become extinct. So let's say you have a dog that gets into the trash with regularity and you've had it up to your eyeballs with cleaning up the mess every time you come home. The first step in solving a problem like this is to realize the importance of consistency in applying the

punishment you've decided on (I'll discuss various punishments and reinforcements later). Let's say you are a little slack in catching your dog when they are getting into the trash and you only catch them an average of 4 out of 5 times. What ends up happening is that your dog gets rewarded 1 out of 5 times and that reward becomes variable and intermittent. This is a great way to addict your dog to trying to get into the trash. Well, so much for putting an end to that behavior. Do you see the point?

So it is critical that you control your dog's environment when you are not available to give them the consistent feedback they need to receive in order to get them to leave the trash alone. Other factors can enter into this picture as well. Dogs can easily figure out that when you are present, they need to leave things alone and that when you leave, they can get into those things without consequence. This is basically an issue of who owns it. In the dog world, he who has possession of the object is the current owner. If your dog is one that decides to get into the trash only when you are not around, you have not made the message clear that the trash can is always yours, even in your absence. Coming back hours later and scolding your dog when they have already gotten into the trash hours before makes little sense to them. If they are not in immediate possession or in the immediate vicinity of the object you are only going to make your dog leery of you. Giving your dog access to doing the things you don't want them doing when you are not around will only serve to undermine your efforts. There are simple ways to booby-trap your dog so they learn not to do these things in your absence as well. I'll talk more about that later.

I am all for keeping things simple. So, when working with my clients, I break the four reinforcements and punishments down into two categories. I call them positive consequences and negative consequences. Later, I'll show you how to apply consequences in a very specific way that facilitates teaching your dog that listening to you should be at the top of their priority list. But before we do that, I think it is important for you to learn about nature and its influence on learning.

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Printed in U.S.A. ISBN 1-43483-146-9