Dane County Humane Society
Helping People Help Animals

Positive Reinforcement

Positive reinforcement is a training method that rewards a behavior that you want to encourage and ignoring or redirecting the behaviors that you don't. Rewards can vary from dog to dog. Treats are typically the easiest reward, but it could also be praise, your dog's favorite toy, going for a walk, or anything that your dog finds enjoyable and fun!

Reasons to use positive reinforcement training:

- Studies show that dogs trained using positive reinforcement were more well-behaved
- It builds trust and strengthens the bond between you and your dog
- Reward based training is mentally stimulating and fun for your dog
- It's less stressful and therefore better for your dog's health and well-being

Why is positive reinforcement recommended above other training methods?

Positive reinforcement is safest and most effective way to train your dog. Adverse training (or negative reinforcement) such as shock collars, striking the dog or intimidating them, can increase stress and fear in dogs even after the training session is over. With shock/vibration collars, timing is extremely important and if not done at the right moment can lead to confusion and frustration in a dog. That dog can then also associate something completely unrelated from the behavior as something negative. Say you are trying to stop your dog from barking at your neighbor walking by. If shocked every time he barks at the neighbor, the dog may learn to associate that neighbor with the shock and not the undesirable behavior (barking). This can increase the fear and possibly aggression towards that neighbor. Think about it in perspective of your dog; when he sees that neighbor, he tends to get an uncomfortable feeling and therefore can form a fear of that neighbor. To avoid any confusion, stress or safety concerns for you and your dog, positive reinforcement is the way to go!

Effects on a dog trained with adverse training:

- Decreased trust with owner
- Increased fear and stress during day to day life
- Negative association with triggers
- Possible increase in aggression

It is important to note that every dog has different experiences and can react to punishment methods differently. If you have used negative reinforcement in the past with no aggression or fear issues, just remember that your new dog might not be as receptive to it and you might see the above reactions. That doesn't mean that the dog is a bad dog, or that you are a bad owner, it just means that you need to adjust and try a different method of training!

Rewards

When choosing a reward, it is important to keep in mind what your dog enjoys and finds exciting. Some dogs are very food motivated so delicious treats are the best way to train. Other dogs are more motivated by praise and attention. It is important that you pick the right reward for your dog. If you choose something that your dog dislikes or only finds tolerable, he will not find the experience enjoyable

and will associate the behavior with something negative and will less likely want to perform the behavior.

Examples of typical rewards:

- Treats (the tastier the better)
- Verbal praise (“Yes” or “Good job”)
- Your dog’s favorite toys
- Physical affection
- Games (tug of war or fetch)
- Walks

Timing

Timing during any training is the key to success. You should be rewarding your dog as quickly as possible after they perform the behavior. The reward should be given within a few seconds after the behavior is performed. The longer you wait to reward the behavior, the higher the chance your dog will not associate the treat with the behavior.

While learning a new trick or behavior, you can practice *continuous reinforcement*. This means giving a reward every time the dog performs the behavior. Once the dog associates the reward with the behavior, you want to make sure that you start practicing *intermittent reinforcement*. Start by giving a reward 3 out of 5 times the behavior is performed and then slowly less and less until rewards are only occasional. You can continue with a positive verbal reward of “good dog” or whatever cue word you have chosen but treats/other rewards should not have to be given every time for the command to be followed through.

Shaping Method

The shaping method is breaking down the behavior or trick into smaller steps and then building on until you have the behavior you want. You start by reinforcing a similar behavior and the gradually adding more onto that behavior for your dog to follow. For example, if you want to “shake” you can reward your dog for just raising its paw. Once it has learned that, you can start reinforcing him for bringing his paw to your hand. This makes learning the trick easier for your dog to follow and learn.

Consistency

Consistency is extremely important in shaping a behavior. It is important for everyone to be consistent in rewarding behaviors you want to see and not rewarding “bad” behaviors. If everyone in the family or home is not consistent or using the same commands, your dog can get confused and may not learn the command/behavior.

Distractions

When starting out your training sessions, you want to be a controlled environment with limited distractions so you can set your dog up for success. This will create an environment that will encourage your dog to focus on you and your commands. When you think your dog has fully learned the behavior, you can gradually add more distractions. While adding distractions, you want to reward your dog before

they fail and give into those distractions. You also do not want to add on distractions too soon otherwise your dog will not listen to you and can become frustrating, making training not enjoyable.

For example: You want to teach your dog “stay”. Start with training them someplace like your living room with very little to no distractions. Once your dog can “stay” with no distractions, you can add little distractions like dropping a treat to your side, squeaking their favorite toy, having another person distracting them with treats. You want to continuously reward them for staying and timing the reward before they break that stay to go for the treat/toy.