BEHAVIOR SERIES

Positive Reinforcement

Training Your Dog (or Cat!) with Treats and Praise

WE ALL LIKE TO BE PRAISED rather than punished. The same is true for your pet, and that's the theory behind positive reinforcement. Positive reinforcement means giving your pet something pleasant or rewarding immediately after she does something you want her to do. Because your praise or reward makes her more likely to repeat that behavior in the future, it is one of your most powerful tools for shaping or changing your pet's behavior.

Correct timing is essential when using positive reinforcement. The reward must occur immediately—within seconds—or your pet may not associate it with the proper action. For example, if you have your dog "sit" but reward her after she's already stood back up, she'll think she's being rewarded for standing up.

Consistency is also essential. Everyone in the family should use the same commands. It might help to post these where everyone can become familiar with them. The most commonly used commands for dogs are:

- "Sit"
- "Stay"
- "Down" (which means "lie down")
- "Off" (which means "get off of me" or "get off the furniture")
- "Stand"
- "Come"
- "Heel" (or "let's go" or "with me")
- "Leave it"
- "Settle"
- "Watch me"

Consistency means always rewarding the desired behavior and never rewarding undesired behavior.

Using Positive Reinforcement

For your pet, positive reinforcement may include food treats, praise, petting, or a favorite toy or game. Food treats work especially well for training your dog. A treat should be enticing and irresistible to your pet. It should be a very small, soft piece of food, so that she will immediately gulp it down and look to you for more. If you give her something she has to chew or that breaks into bits and falls on the floor, she'll be looking around the floor, not at you. Small pieces of soft commercial treats, hot dogs, cheese, or cooked chicken or beef have all proven successful. Experiment to see what works best for your pet. You can carry the treats in a pocket or fanny pack. Each time you use a food reward, you should couple it with a verbal reward (praise). Say something like, "Good dog," in a positive, happy tone of voice.

Some pets may not be interested in food treats. For those pets, the reward could be in the form of a toy or brief play.

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When your pet is learning a new behavior, she should be rewarded every time she does the behavior, which means continuous reinforcement. It may be necessary to use a technique called "shaping" with your pet, which means reinforcing something close to the desired response and then gradually requiring more from your dog before she gets the treat. For example, if you're teaching your dog to "shake hands," you may initially reward her for lifting her paw off the ground, then for lifting it higher, then for touching your hand, then for letting you hold her paw, and finally, for actually "shaking hands" with you.

Intermittent reinforcement can be used once your pet has reliably learned the behavior. At first, reward her with the treat three out of every four times she does the behavior. Then, over time, reward her about half the time, then about a third of the time, and so on, until you're only rewarding her occasionally with the treat. Continue to praise her every time—although once your dog has learned the behavior, your praise can be less effusive, such as a quiet, but positive, "Good dog." Use a variable schedule of reinforcement so that she doesn't catch on that she only has to respond every other time. Your pet will soon learn that if she keeps responding, eventually she'll get what she wants—your praise and an occasional treat.

By understanding reinforcement, you'll see that you're not forever bound to carry a pocketful of goodies. Your dog will soon be working for your verbal praise, because she really does want to please you and knows that, occasionally, she'll get a treat, too. There are many small opportunities to reinforce her behavior. You may have her "sit" before letting her out the door (which helps prevent door-darting), before petting her (which helps prevent jumping up on people), or before feeding her. Give her a pat or a "Good dog" for lying quietly by your feet, or slip a treat into a Kong®-type toy when she's chewing it instead of your shoe.

The Pros and Cons of Punishment

Punishment can be verbal, postural, or physical, and it means giving your pet something unpleasant immediately after she does something you don't want her to do. The punishment makes it less likely that the behavior will occur again. To be effective, punishment must be delivered while your pet is engaged in the undesirable behavior—in other words, "caught in the act." If the punishment is delivered too late, even seconds later, your pet will not associate the punishment with the undesired behavior.

Punishment delivered by you may erode your dog's trust. That's why punishment is most effective when it does not come directly from you. For example, after your dog acts in an undesirable way, use a shake can, an air horn, or keys—but don't draw attention to the fact that the noise comes from you. If your dog perceives her "environment," instead of you, to be delivering the punishment, she'll be more likely to avoid the behavior even when you're not around.

In addition, if you're too late in administering it, punishment will seem unpredictable to your dog. She's likely to become fearful, distrustful, or aggressive, which will only lead to more behavior problems. What we humans often interpret as "guilty" looks are actually submissive postures by our pets. Animals don't have a moral sense of right and wrong, but they are adept at associating your presence, and the presence of a mess, with punishment.

If you've tried punishment and it hasn't worked, you should stop using punishment and use only positive reinforcement. And never use physical punishment that involves some level of discomfort or pain, which may cause your pet to bite to defend herself. Holding the neck skin and shaking your dog or performing "alpha rolls" (forcing your dog onto her back and pinning her on the floor) are both likely to result in bites. And punishment might be associated with other stimuli, including people, that are present at the time the punishment occurs. For example, a pet who is punished for getting too close to a small child may become fearful of, or aggressive toward, that child—or toward other children. That's why physical punishment is not only bad for your pet, it's also bad for you and others.

Adapted from material originally developed by applied animal behaviorists at the Dumb Friends League, Denver, Colorado.
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