



EXPERT IN: Reactivity, Aggression, Terriers, Hounds, & Rescue Dogs

THE POWER OF POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT

Operant conditioning is a process that can modify behaviour through the use of positive reinforcement. Through operant conditioning, a positive reinforcer allows an individual to make an association between a specific behaviour and a positive consequence.

As modern dog trainers, we avoid using punishment-based training, such as choke chains or harnesses designed to cause pain when the dog pulls on the lead or shaking a can of coins when your dog is a nuisance barking. This kind of traditional training teaches the dog to suppress behaviour to avoid pain. However, the fallout can spill out into other aspects of the dog's life. Therefore creating other unwanted behaviours. In the case of shaking a can of coins, the dog becomes desensitised to the noise in the best-case scenario and learns to ignore it. Our aim through positive reinforcement is to encourage dogs to think for themselves and make good choices and increase the frequency of these good decisions by making them sufficiently rewarding.



Primary Reinforcers

Food is a primary reinforcer and, therefore, a high-value reward. In dogs that can be very distracted and/or are fearful/anxious in specific environments. It may be difficult for them to accept food as a reward when you begin training, do not worry! Eating is an operant behaviour. We can increase the chances of your dog accepting a food reward. By pairing it with something else, the dog enjoys, e.g. a favourite toy or activity, until the food becomes the reward.

Even with seemingly food-motivated dogs, it is a good idea to wear something with pockets and have two different food rewards, e.g. their kibble, which does not have to be in addition to their usual meals, and something of a higher value. You can take out half their meal with you. Dogs like to work for food; it's more rewarding as they enjoy it for longer. The kibble should be used as their main reward, and a higher value reward such as cheese, chicken or spicy sausage reinforces the dog for performing desirable behaviours strongly. If your dog will only eat a higher value reward initially, that's fine. Remember to decrease the size of their typical meals for weight management purposes.

Markers

To increase the frequency of your dog performing specific behaviour such as a 'sit' while you're waiting to cross the road, we can introduce a verbal marker. This should be a one-syllable word like 'yes' or 'good' that marks the behaviour. Then we deliver the food reward to reinforce that behaviour. The only downside to using a marker is that it is a promise that something good will happen. Therefore, if you make a mistake and mark the wrong behaviour, you must still deliver the reward, or the marker will eventually become redundant. It is fine to make mistakes, bad timing with the odd marker here and there will not impact the training overall. Do not mark or reward within 5 seconds of unwanted behaviour, e.g. inappropriate barking, or you may reinforce that instead of the behaviour you want to increase. Once you have mastered your verbal marker, you can move on to using a clicker if you want to. The same principles apply except that the click marks an exact behaviour, so you may want to practice using it with a person to see how accurate you are before using it to train your dog.