

Owners' top five training mistakes

Inconsistency heads the list while confusing positive methods with permissiveness comes in a close second

■ These days, the conscientious, educated dog owner has a wealth of resources to meet the challenges of training. Countless books, DVDs, seminars and organizations promote science-based, positive reinforcement training, and more and more trainers and owners choose this effective, non-confrontational approach to influence their dogs' behavior. Even the best methods have to be executed properly to work, however, and when implementation is faulty, the result can be an ill-behaved dog — regardless of the training method.

Humans commonly make several mistakes in convincing their dogs to behave appropriately. Here are five of them:

Mistake No. 1: Inconsistency

The following helps explain why inconsistency is destructive to your dog's training program:

- All living beings repeat behaviors that are reinforcing to them.
- Behaviors that are intermittently reinforced (sometimes reinforced, sometimes not) become resistant to extinction (it's hard to make them go away).
- Dogs do what works.

Let's say Mom doesn't want the family dog on the sofa, but Dad loves to cuddle with Rocky and share popcorn when he watches football games. The sofa is comfortable, and Rocky likes Dad's attention (and popcorn) so it's very reinforcing to Rocky to be on the sofa. Because Rocky is intermittently reinforced by Dad for getting on the sofa, he continues to jump up there despite Mom's occasional scolding. It will be difficult to



Destruction, vocalization and elimination are common signs of separation anxiety. They're not caused by anger at being left home alone.

get him to stop getting on the sofa because he's convinced that, if he just does it enough, the reinforcement will happen again. And it works — Dad inevitably gives him attention and popcorn when he gets on the sofa, so he'll keep doing it.

The same is true of any inconsistencies in your training. If you sometimes let your dog pull on the leash and sometimes don't, you'll likely always be struggling for polite leash walking. If he's sometimes petted and given attention when he greets people by jumping up, and sometimes isn't, he's likely to always greet people rudely.

The solution: Have all family members agree on house rules, manage your dog's environment so he isn't rein-

forced for unwanted behaviors, and generously reinforce desired incompatible behaviors (behaviors that he can't do at the same time as the unwanted behavior). In Rocky's case, give him popcorn and attention for being on the floor (he can't be on the floor and on the sofa at the same time), use leashes, tethers, body blocking (gently moving into his space) and "off" or "wait" cues to prevent him from getting up, and convince Dad to agree to keeping him on the floor. Clearly, training Dad is the hardest part of this scenario.

Mistake No. 2: Confusing "positive" with "permissive"

Let me make this perfectly clear. Being positive doesn't mean letting



An extra walk provides a healthy alternative to food treats as a reinforcer.

Positive trainers use 'negative punishment' in which inappropriate behavior makes good things go away.

patible behavior of "not jumping."

Positive trainers also use an aversive stimulus, such as a child if the dog doesn't like children, at a low intensity that makes him only slightly uncomfortable. They pair the aversive with something wonderful to him, such as

a high-value treat, gradually bringing the aversive close until the dog is comfortable with it.

Regardless of the training method used, being permissive — allowing the dog to do anything he wants — results in a spoiled, out-of-control, obnoxious dog. No responsible dog owner wants that.

Mistake No. 3: Failure to appropriately deliver reinforcers

The key to successful dog training is knowing how to effectively manipulate the reinforcers. Being able to identify, control and deliver reinforcers for desired behavior is the easiest, most humane means of getting your dog to do what you want him to do.

Reinforcers are not limited to food although food can be highly reinforcing. They can also be toys, interactions and activities — anything your dog likes. (See the sidebar on page 5.)

When you have identified the things your dog loves and taught him to love more things, be sure to deliver them for good behavior. Have him sit and wait to get his dinner. Ask him to lie down before you toss his ball. Have him walk politely by your side to get to the pond before you take off his leash and let him jump in. But you don't have to ask him to do something

before you deliver a reinforcer — be sure to reward him if he's volunteering a desirable behavior without being asked. Volunteering is even better!

Mistake No. 4: Succumbing to the lure of positive punishment

Don't confuse positive punishment with positive reinforcement. Positive punishment involves yelling or force. It seems to be part of human nature to want to correct and punish — and we're all human. We are sometimes so stressed by life in general or so annoyed by our dogs' behavior that we lose our temper and yell at them. That's positive punishment — when the dog's behavior makes a bad thing happen and as a result, his behavior decreases. And guess what? It works!

When you get mad at your dog, he generally stops doing whatever it was that annoyed you. You have suppressed the behavior — at least for the moment. It may have frightened him enough that he won't ever do it again, it may have just stopped him for the moment, or it may have simply taught him that he should do it only when you can't see him, but because it stopped the behavior for the moment, it's reinforcing to you.

Remember that behaviors that are reinforced are likely to be repeated, so having been reinforced for yelling at your dog, if you're not careful, you may be more likely to yell at your dog again. The problem with this is that you're teaching your dog that you are unpredictable and possibly violent. He learns not to trust you and perhaps even to fear you. Some dogs even become aggressive in response to their human's aggressive behavior. Is that really what you want?

Look beyond liver treats to reinforce good behavior

You have many options for canine reinforcers. The more creative you are, the longer your list can be. Here is a partial list of reinforcers you might not have considered:

FOOD

- Liver and graham cracker treats (homemade)
- Tomato and parmesan treats (homemade)
- Cheddar Goldfish
- String cheese
- Bil Jac balls (piece of Bil Jac food rolled into a little ball)
- Cheerios
- Sardines
- Bananas
- Raspberries
- Blueberries
- Cucumber slices
- Raw carrots

OBJECTS

- Ball that bounces oddly and makes noise
- Big knotted scrap of fleece fabric
- Hide-A-Squirrel puzzle toy
- Anything under a towel making a bump
- Knotted sock with treat tied inside



The puzzle toy Hide-A-Squirrel can serve as a reinforcer in training or an alternative to boredom. Dogs work to remove the toys; clever ones learn how to put them back in.

Note: Remember that young dogs who still love to chew are prone to swallowing small objects and objects that can be chewed into small pieces, causing serious illness.

INTERACTIONS

- Getting scratched at the base of his tail
- Having his ears rubbed
- Massage
- An outing
- Quiet praise with soft eye contact
- Big “whoo hoo” praise with jumping around in excitement
- Hide and seek games
- Flirt pole, a sturdy pole with a stuffed toy tied to the end that the dog chases as you move it around
- Belly rub

Instead, when you find yourself tempted to punish your dog by yelling or other punishment, take a step back. Figure out how to manage your dog so he can't do the behavior that's annoying you, and how to consistently reinforce him for an

incompatible behavior in its place. You'll both be happier for it.

Mistake No. 5: Misinterpreting motives for canine behavior

It's easy to fall into the anthropo-

morphic trap of attributing human motives to our canine companions. After all, they share their lives closely with humans, and we now know they experience emotions very similar to those of humans — so why shouldn't they also share human-type motives such as spite and revenge? Simply because, as far as we know, they just don't.

Attributing ulterior motives to basic canine behaviors tends to result in undeserved anger and punishment for the dog. If you come home, find that your dog has damaged the door frame and destroyed your sofa, and attribute it to spitefulness because you left him home while you went out, you're likely to be angry with him and perhaps punish him. If, on the other hand, you realize he was very stressed about being left alone because he has isolation or separation anxiety, you're more likely to be sympathetic and seek the professional help needed, so he doesn't panic when you leave him.

If you think he's sneaky because he gets on the sofa while you're at work but doesn't do it when you're home (“He knows he's not supposed to do it”), you're more likely to punish him than if you realize he's simply been intermittently reinforced for being on the sofa, and he knows it's not safe to do it when you're there. Remember our friend Rocky from Mistake No.1?

All caring, responsible dog owners do the best they can in their dog's training programs. If you can remember these five mistakes and avoid committing them, you'll do even better. ■

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