

Y Positive?

(Why Be Positive?)

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Mother used to tell me that you can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar. I could never figure out why I would want to attract flies. She was trying to teach me that sweetness was more attractive than sourness. And, of course, mother was right! But now that my life revolves around dogs I ask myself, “How does that work with this other species?”

Certainly, dogs enjoy pleasant, sweet interactions with their humans. They, like humans, also respond to sour or negative reactions. For this reason we often hang onto punishment based training as it seems to get us the result we want. Sometimes a negative response from us does end a dog’s behavior. However, we don’t always consider what this might have done to our long term relationship with our dog or to their attitude or feeling about the situation.

All consequences get connected to more than just the single behavior or situation. Pleasant consequences will leak into the surrounding environment and what has occurred just prior. The same is true of negative consequences.

These associations are strong and uncontrollable. I once had a dog run to me for a pig’s ear. As Gambit arrived on the porch, I heard him yelp. He left me and the pig’s ear. Later that day I realized that he had tweaked his neck during the episode. I would have been fine if the lesson he learned was, “running crazily can cause injury.” However, he made a different association with the pain. Gambit was forever afraid of pig’s ears! And he was never very good about inhibiting his reckless running on the porch.

Unpleasant consequences can cause emotions like dread, fear and anxiety. Overcoming these can be very difficult. Pleasant consequences can bring happiness, contentment, positive anticipation and confidence. These are the type of emotions we seek to create and encourage in our dogs.

So, with those thoughts in mind, I am going to choose consequences that my dog likes the majority of the time. If I use a tasty treat to teach my dog to sit at training class he may also associate that treat with the building, the people and the other dogs. That little treat has given me the most bang for my buck.

Using positive consequences to reinforce behavior you want will also give you an idea of your dog’s stress level and ability to learn. Sometimes I will tell a client that we may need a better reward if the dog is not working or doing well, and indeed this can be true. However, stress will also keep a dog from accepting something that is usually important to him. A frightened, worried or stressed dog may not eat even the best treat. If a dog cannot eat he is in fight or flight mode and not really a candidate for learning. This is your very clear sign to change the situation so that your dog is comfortable enough to partake of a snack. Though play, praise and other fun activities can also be rejected by stressed dogs, great food is your best barometer.

I tend to use treats a lot in my training as they are very powerful and quite portable. And I have to feed my dog anyway. In a group situation they don’t distract the other dogs as much as a good game of fetch or tug (great rewards for many dogs). Food also has a calming benefit. Eating changes the

body's chemistry, literally and figuratively. Eating also is incompatible with other behaviors such as barking. Peanut butter and canned cheese are the treats that keep on giving. A bit in the mouth lasts and lasts. While your dog clears the roof of his mouth or his flews there are extra seconds of silence and good feelings for everyone. Not to mention a real giggle for the humans watching. Searching for treats on the ground keeps a dog from jumping or moving forward. Tossing a treat in a particular area can direct a dog to or away from a situation. All the while the dog is increasing his positive association with much of what is in the area and you are getting behavior that you like.

Though food is my top choice for a positive consequence it is not the only one. I love the client with a "spoiled" dog. What this means to me is that the dog has many things in life that he wants and makes him happy. Food, toys, belly rubs, access to furniture, etc. can all be used to reinforce good behavior in a dog. "Spoiled" means I have more tools in my box to work with that dog. Giving a dog his favorite toy at special times can increase his positive association with whatever is going on. A dog holding a toy will not be able to mouth a human. Most dogs will not bark and hold a toy. Getting a toy can be an alternative to jumping on guests.

Many people do not realize they have a choice in the type of consequences they choose. This is especially true for some of the more troublesome issues with dogs. The good news is that you always have a choice. You may have to change your thinking a bit or look at the situation differently. There is almost always a more positive way to train and work with your dog that will not only get you improvement in behavior but a better attitude...for both of you!

And, lastly, focusing on positive consequences makes you focus on your dog's positive behavior. Many of my clients come to me with their "bad dogs." They are tired and frustrated and are in the cycle of only seeing the negative side of their dog. By focusing on positive reinforcement we also become focused on "good" behavior. Reinforcing that behavior will only get you more of it!

In my training of dogs, I choose honey!