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Your Smart Dog

A Cheat Sheet for the Science of Dog Training

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If you've subscribed to this newsletter, there's a pretty good chance you love your dog and want to do what's best for him. Information about dog training and behavior is plentiful these days and it seems that a new "dog expert" pops up every year. Unfortunately, with so much information it's hard to weed out good information from bad and sometimes our dogs suffer as a result. Advances in science are making it easier to help dog owners navigate through the confusing, and often confounding, maze called dog training.

After learning the science, you'll no longer be reliant on the opinions and advice of your neighbor or the "expert" on TV ...

Since "dog training" is too broad to cover in one newsletter, this article is the first in a series about the science of it all, differences in training philosophy, and how to make it work for you and your dog. After learning the science, you'll no longer be reliant on the opinions and advice of your neighbor or the "expert" on TV – this article will arm you with the knowledge you need to sort through it all and the confidence of knowing you're teaching your dog with the very best methods and tools out there.

This month I'll introduce you to the science behind the training. Not the boring, hum-

drum stuff, but the juicy and fascinating parts of the science that will open your eyes to a new way of teaching your dog. I promise it's a fun way that you and your dog can both enjoy! The subsequent articles in this series will cover methods and game plans to implement what you'll be learning this month. Let the learning begin...

For decades, positive training methods have been used to train many species, from exotic animals like dolphins and whales to more ordinary house pets such as dogs and cats. The mid 1990's, however, saw a steady increase in the use of *clicker training*. Clicker training is rooted in the science called operant conditioning. (Do a Google search on operant conditioning if you want all the nitty-gritty science. Consider this article your "cheat sheet.") An overwhelming number of research studies have documented the success of operant conditioning in teaching animals (and people!) to learn.

The real gem of operant conditioning is *positive reinforcement*.

The crux of what you need to know is this: the consequences of our actions help us (humans and animals) decide if something was a good choice or not. Let's say that every time you wear a green shirt, people always tell you how good you look.



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Chances are, you'll wear that shirt more often! On the other hand, if every time you wear green, people ask you if you're sick, you'll probably push that shirt to the back of your closet. Science has proven that when we do something that results in reinforcement (a reward), we're more likely to do that thing again. Consequently, we engage less in behaviors that result in punishment. I'll cover the important side effects associated with reinforcement and punishment in an upcoming installment of the newsletter.

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The real gem of operant conditioning is *positive reinforcement*. Positive reinforcement is closely linked with the most basic needs: food, water, shelter, mental stimulation, and human interaction. Dogs learn rapidly that acting in a particular way (sitting to greet you) results in a reward that meets one of those basic needs (love and attention from you). This is where it gets fun – you get to be your dog's hero! Think of all the things your dog loves: going outside, belly rubs, playing tug, snuggling on the couch, roughhouse play, chasing a ball, eating dinner, going for a walk, getting a car ride...the list is long (which is a good thing, as we'll discuss later). So all you have to do is pair any one of those good things with the dog's behavior that you like. For instance, I like it when my dog sits. So, the next time I ask my dog to sit and he does, I

will rub his belly as a reward. Remember, behavior that gets rewarded, gets repeated. So, pretty soon, your dog will do a lot more sitting (which means he's doing a lot less jumping, barking, chewing, etc.)

While the above scenario works, there is a tool that facilitates even faster learning – it's called the clicker. There isn't anything magical about the clicker. It's a small box-like tool that when pressed, makes a distinct "click." Initially the click doesn't mean anything to the dog, but if we pair that click with something the dog loves (food is the easiest choice), the dog quickly learns to listen for the click, as that click predicts that a reward will be coming. The click also buys us, the human, a little bit of time. Operant conditioning requires that consequences be immediate – preferably while the behavior is still in progress. It's impossible for us to run and grab a goodie the instant the dog does something we like, but the clicker works as a "bridge" giving us the time we need to deliver the reward so the dog can still associate it with what he did.

Once the dog knows that click = treat, we can begin to mark the behavior we like with a click and then follow that immediately with a reward. The entire sequence looks like this:

1. Dog sits
2. You click immediately (to let the dog know that the reward is coming for the act of sitting)
3. Deliver the reward to the dog.

If you don't have a clicker, you can substitute the word "good," instead, but



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research shows that the actual click facilitates faster learning because the sound is unlike any other sound in the dog's environment. When you think about it, we're talking much of the time when we're around our dogs, and very little of that conversation is directed at the dog. They learn to tune our voices out quickly, lest they go crazy trying to keep up with our conversations! And since spoken language is not in their repertoire, words don't have the same impact on them.



Next month's topic will be the other half of operant conditioning – punishment. I think you'll be surprised at the definitions of punishment and what conclusions the research has drawn about the use of punishment in teaching your dog. After we cover the two parts of operant conditioning, the third article in the series will discuss how to put that knowledge to work for you. I think you'll be amazed at the many other situations to which you can put this information to work.

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Helping good dogs become great dogs.

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