

Dog Training by PJ

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Rewards or Punishments:

*Ideas and Methods: Pseudoscience,
Science, Anecdotal and How Do Dogs Learn?*

Part II

This is part II of the series: Rewards or Punishments: Consider Reinforcement First

By: Pamela "PJ" Wangsness, CPDT

After reading the first part of this series, "Rewards or Punishments: What to Consider," you may want to read more about dog behavior and training. I've taken the topics from many expert sources, various scholars and behaviorists and condensed information to help you make a conscious choice for training and what is best for your dog. Interestingly, behavior, learning and training have been studied and written about for many decades. Remember Pavlov? Now, think of Skinner, the Brelands, Scott, Fuller, Overall, Fox, Miklosi, Pryor, Abrantes, Coppinger, Bailey, Donaldson, Houpt, Reid, Dunbar, McConnell, Hetts, Lindsey, Dodman, O'Heare, Serpell, Fisher, and many others. So while I don't have new revelations in the world of behavior and training, I offer some "food for thought."

There are plenty of published materials on training dogs or dog behavior. Part of reading about training dogs, should include some personal "filters." Some filters could include questions, such as, how does an author support the "belief or claim?" Is there scientific data to support the "evidence?" How did the writer determine their conclusions? Additionally, to understand how dogs learn we need to evaluate and consider these ideas:

- Are training methods based in science, pseudoscience or anecdotal
- Definitions for words: compulsion, coerce or coercion, force, abuse, training, train, obey
- How do dogs really learn
- Does developmental stages have a role

In the next and final series we will explore, evaluate and consider these ideas on how dogs learn:

- Are there stages of learning
- What is learning theory
- What are the differences between force, coercion and abuse
- Are you enthusiastic and willing to utilize the methods you choose
- Should you consider the type of relationship you have or desire with your dog

SCIENCE, PSEUDOSCIENCE OR ANECDOTAL?

Do you wish to believe in science or take comfort in various pseudoscientific beliefs or anecdotal personal experiences? Are you willing to believe advocates how to train a dog, just because they "know it works" without the benefit of objective scientific data. Should you "just take their word" because it "works?" Should you presume that the methods, theories and ideas have merit without any warrant to scientific basis or application? Then, at what price does it "work" when training your dog? How do you decide when choosing who or what to believe and follow?

Let's start with **Dogs: A New Understanding of Canine Origin, Behavior and Evolution**, written by Raymond & Lorna Coppinger. Next, consider **Evolution of Canine Social Behavior, 2nd Edition**, by Roger Abrantes or **Handbook of Applied Dog Behavior and Training**, by Steven R. Lindsay. Then, if you are still not sure if you should follow science, learning theory and ethology, read **Domestic Dog, Its Evolution, Behavior and Interactions with People**, by James Serpell.

Still wondering what to believe? Who to read? Should you use punishments or rewards? Does science, pseudoscience or anecdotal information determine how we train dogs?

Recently, the American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior, in response to the popularity of some television programs, issued a position statement and guidelines on the use of punishment for dealing with behavior problems in animal, dated February 15, 2008. These guidelines clarify that while punishment can be effective in *specific contexts*, it has *many adverse effects*. For example "punishment may only temporarily suppress the unwanted behavior but it doesn't necessarily modify the *underlying cause of the behavior* or can interfere with the bond between the dog and the owner." The AVSAB position statements and guidelines are available on line at: <http://www.avsabonline.org/avsabonline/>

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Or the full link for position papers:

http://www.avsonline.org/avsonline/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=80&Itemid=215

Let's remember how "punishment" is defined in training. Punishment *lowers the probability of the behavior while reward or reinforcer increases the probability or frequency of the behavior.*

Now, consider, *compulsion, coerce or coercion, force, abuse, training, train and obey.* Webster's New World College Dictionary defines these words as follows:

Compulsion: "a compelling or being compelled, coercion, constraint ... an **irresistible, repeated, irrational impulse** to perform." (Emphasis added)

Coerce: "to restrain or constrain by force...to force or compel as by threats...to **bring about by using force.**" (Emphasis added)

Force: "strength, energy, vigor, power... **physical power or strength exerted against**...the power to control..." (Emphasis added)

Abuse: "to use wrongly, misuse...to hurt by treating badly...to **inflict physical or psychological harm upon or injury.**" (Emphasis added)

Training: "the action or method one uses to train."

Train: "a series of events or conditions that follow some happening...to guide the growth of....to subject to certain action, exercises in order to **bring a desired condition or to condition (animals) to perform or obey.**" (Emphasis added)

Obey: "to be **guided by** or to carry out the instructions." (Emphasis added)

Therefore, **punishment does not mean physical or psychological harm or injury.** Punishment does not mean coercion, force or compulsion and most certainly does not mean abuse. Punishment simply involves the presentation of a bad consequence (positive punishment) when the response is performed or the removal of a good consequence (negative punishment) when the response is performed. **Positive punishment** might be when you ask your dog to sit, he lies down instead and you jerk him onto his feet. **Negative punishment** might be when you ask your dog to

sit, he lies down and you eat his treat you were about to give him. When employing these various forms of positive punishment, negative punishment, positive reinforcement or negative reinforcement, you must be comfortable with their uses and understand the consequences.

SO HOW DO DOGS REALLY LEARN?

Learning theory is an explanation of how learning works and there is a difference between "knowing something" and "doing something." Whether or not a behavior is performed will depend on many factors, including: opportunity, motivation, physical abilities and learning.¹

Relevant developmental processes also bind learning or the lack of learning. For example, many canine skills like retrieving, willingness to remain close when on walks, coming when called or housetraining have especially sensitive periods for introduction and training. For example, if a puppy is prevented from engaging in ball play until after week 14 or so, he might not show a significant interest to engage in ball fetching later on. On a good note, however, dogs can be eventually trained to retrieve but the process is impeded by a lack of early exposure and experience. Puppies exposed to early play (retrieval) are more likely to retrieve than those puppies exposed to retrieving at 32-weeks of age.² So how does that effect training?

DEVELOPMENT STAGES FOR BEHAVIOR

In the early 1960's, John Paul Scott and John L. Fuller asked the question, "What does heredity do to behavior?" From this question, they began a study of genetics and the social behavior of dogs. This study is often the cornerstone for how training, socialization, learning and behavior are used when working with dogs. For this article we will briefly explore the stages of learning and behavior, as follows:

FIRST STAGE: Neonatal period (birth to 2 weeks)

- An undeveloped brain, few sensory capacities and poor motor abilities.
- Puppy has enhanced taste and smelling abilities.
- Puppies can't regulate their own body temperature internally.

¹ Excel-Erated Learning, Explaining (in plain English) How Dogs Learn and How Best to Teach Them, Pamela J. Reid, Ph.D, James & Kenneth Publishers, 1996, p. 6

² Handbook of Applied Dog Behavior and Training, Vol 1, Adaptation and Learning, Steven R. Lindsay, Iowa State Press 2000, Ch 2, pp. 66-67

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- Pup's behavior is largely reflexive.
- It is suggested that careful/gentle brief handling such as stroking, carefully picking up and holding for a few seconds - help the pup tolerate "stressors" later in life.

SECOND STAGE: Transitional period (2-3 weeks)

- The puppy behavioral capabilities begin to reorganize and puppy begins to explore.
- Pups begin to develop sensory and ability to move.
- Vision and hearing improve dramatically.
- Puppies may show agonistic behavior with other little mates, such as pawing at each other.
- Puppies show signs of being able to startle to sounds about Day 20.

This is the beginning of the "socialization period" which is the most important period of the puppy's life and should be allowed to explore on various surfaces, begin feeding on the gruel and be allowed to crawl away (short distances) from the resting area to eliminate.

THIRD STAGE: Critical Socialization Period (3-12 weeks)

- Puppies have ability to distinguish between familiar and unfamiliar people, objects, locations, etc.
- Puppies begin to form social attachments (or lack thereof.)
- Puppies respond to certain visual stimulus, smells, noises etc.
- This period is when the lack of "socializing the pup" is often referred to as the "kennel-dog syndrome."
- It is crucial that all "new things" are pleasant for the puppy since it makes an impression on the pup for the remainder of its life.

FOURTH STAGE: Juvenile Period (12 weeks to maturity)

- Pup forms secondary social relationships.
- This is often when people, breeders, some trainers, and plenty of books like to use "anthropomorphic interpretations" (assign human emotions) as to what the dog is doing at this age.

- The active and curious puppy is not "testing the rules" rather the puppy/dog has not been completely trained.
- The dog is becomes increasingly more independent and self-reliant.
- Dependency on human decreases while the environmental interest increases.
- Dogs become less attentive to owners and are not quite as reliable in responding to owner's requests and not because the dog is "rebellious." It is just because of this stage of development.³

Read the final part of this three part series;

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³ Genetics and the Social Behavior of the Dog, John Paul Scott and John L. Fuller, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1965, Ch 4, pp 84-117