



## **The Truth About Positive Dog Training**

### **A Brief History**

Dog training has undergone tremendous changes since the 60's. Researchers such as Scott and Fuller and Pfaffenberger changed the way people perceived their canine companions and caused many of the old training methods to be questioned. In addition, trainers of captive sea mammals began to promote their training methods for use in dogs. These "sea world" trainers had been using food as a training method to lure and reward behaviors and teach tricks to please the crowds. Since no one can force a killer whale or a dolphin to perform using a collar and leash or any form of punishment, these trainers had to find other ways to get the cooperation of these intelligent animals!

During this time, dog and horse trainers were still primarily using force and punishment to train. These trainers were/are not cruel people and the methods used were thought to be the only way to train. Most trainers would not waste time trying to lure a dog into a sit when a good push on the butt along with a quick jerk on the collar would do the trick. In fact, using food as a lure/reward was frowned on by most trainers of the day. The only dog trainers who were routinely using food to train were the show dog handlers and they were quite happy with the result--an alert, happy dog who was excited to do what the handler wanted. Unfortunately, it would be a while before the experiences of the show dog trainers and the dolphin trainers would be accepted. Even those who used positive reinforcement (food or toys) to train their show dogs never used it to train for the obedience ring! Such things were strictly forbidden in a sport that had its roots in the military, so obedience trainers continued to use collar corrections and physical force to train. It was also common not to start training a dog until he/she was at least 6 months old and many bad habits had been formed. Part of the reason for waiting until the dog was older was so he/she could handle the harsher methods. (Now we know that training should start as early as possible and with positive methods, there is no reason to wait!)

It wasn't long before a growing group of trainers began to see how much more quickly and easily good results could be obtained by using positive reinforcement instead of force and punishment. Soon positive training methods became the gold standard and today it would be difficult to find a trainer who isn't using positive/reward based training for most or all of his training program.

### **What is Positive Dog Training?**

Positive dog training means using rewards/positive reinforcement rather than punishment and corrections to train. With positive methods the dog is guided/lured into doing a behavior and then rewarded (usually with a food treat) when he complies. Because harsh methods are not used, training can begin very early and most puppies quickly learn the basics without ever having their collars jerked or ever seeing a rolled up newspaper!

### **Can all dogs be trained in this way?**

All dogs can be trained with positive reinforcement but it is only one part of effective training. In addition to positive reinforcement it is important to set up a communication system to “talk dog” so that you can more easily let your dog know what is expected. It is usually not enough to simply reward behavior that you like, it’s also necessary to let the dog know when he does something you don’t like. All dogs need to know the rules-- no jumping up, no chewing the sofa cushions etc.-- so it’s important to be able to tell your dog when he does well AND when he is not doing so well!

### **How can I communicate?**

To communicate effectively, the dog has to be taught what certain words or sounds mean. You should pick a “marker/praise” word to mark good behavior. This word should be short and spoken in a happy excited tone. “Yes!” works very well, although “Good Dog” spoken quickly will work. Dogs respond best to quick, short sounds. To train the Marker word, simply sit with a handful of tiny but tasty treats and say the word over and over with enthusiasm. Each time you say the word you give the dog a treat. He will soon learn that “Yes!” means he did well, you are happy and a treat of some kind will be coming his way.

Just as important is a word or sound that means you are not happy and would like him to stop whatever he is doing. I find that a sound like “aacchhh” spoken in a low, harsh, warning tone along with a disgusted facial expression (dogs read our facial expressions very well!) is understood by most dogs. He will soon learn that sound means no reward and that you aren’t happy. It is important that after using the sound to stop/correct bad behavior, you redirect the dog to do something that he knows how to do. You want to make sure that you set him up to succeed.

For instance, if your dog jumps up on you-- you turn sideways to him and block him as you give your “aacchhh” sound. When he has his feet on the ground again, ask for a sit and reward him when he complies. You have discouraged bad behavior, redirected him to the behavior you do want and then rewarded him.

### **Am I going to have to carry a pocketful of treats forever?**

You should have treats quickly and readily available while you are training your dog. Once the dog is reliably doing what you ask you can start to fade out the treats. You can start by rewarding him intermittently instead of each time. Maybe every other time for a while, then twice in a row, then every 3rd or 4th time etc. You will be turning your dog into a compulsive gambler--and in dogs that's a good thing! He will never be sure when the reward is coming and he will continue to eagerly perform because each time he MIGHT hit the jackpot (think of humans playing the lottery)!

Once he's performing well, you can also start to substitute other things as rewards. A tennis ball for a quick game of catch, a tug toy or a wonderful ear rub with lots of praise will work for most dogs. At other times he is rewarded by getting to do what he wants to do. For instance, the reward for waiting at the door is to be able to go outside--no treat needed! You can go back to treats to train new behaviors and make sure you occasionally use them to reward him at other times. When I'm with my dogs--not necessarily for training, just hanging out--I almost always carry a couple of treats in my pocket in case I need to reward for good behavior.

### **What if my dog doesn't want food treats?**

Most dogs will work for food IF the food is good enough. Training treats should be extra special and very tasty. Dry dog treats are not going to motivate some dogs. For these guys you will have to offer something more worthwhile. Hot dogs cut up into very small pieces, chicken, cheese or other human foods will often work. The pieces should be small enough so that no chewing is necessary--just a tasty morsel.

For a dog that has no interest in food treats, a squeaky toy, tennis ball or tug toy might work and there are dogs who will work happily for praise and petting.

### **But what's this about using a "harsh" sound to stop behavior? That doesn't sound "positive" to me!**

Think of how you'd feel if you were starting your first day on the job and no one would tell you what the rules were. You wouldn't know if you were starting on time, how long the lunch break would be, how to use the equipment or when it was time to go home. What if your boss tried to communicate the rules to you by giving you a few dollars of your pay each time you managed to figure out the right thing to do, but no pay if you chose incorrectly. You would catch on eventually but you might have trouble paying your bills while you were figuring things out.

How much easier it would be to be told what was expected from day one! Dogs, like people, need to know the rules as quickly as possible, to be happy and stress free. The sooner they can understand what is expected the happier they will be. Using a word or sound that they understand to mean "Stop! Wrong choice!" helps with the process and helps your dog to bond with you and look to you for leadership.

### **What kind of training equipment is considered “positive”?**

There is no type of collar, harness, head collar or leash that is all good or all bad. All types of collars, harnesses, head collars and leashes can be used in a punishing way. It is not the equipment, it is the person using the equipment.

The equipment you choose should be appropriate for the age, breed of dog, type of training being done and skill level of the trainer (you!). Most often owners should start with a flat collar, head collar or harness and these will work well for most people. You may be tempted to solve certain training problems--such as pulling on the leash--by buying a slip collar, prong collar or even an e-collar. These collars can be used to enhance communication BUT only by trainers skilled in their use. Most pet dog owners do not know how to use them correctly. Unfortunately, because this type of equipment is easily available, many pet owners think that using them is as simple as buying them. These types of collars, used incorrectly, can create serious new problems, make existing problems worse and damage your relationship with your dog.

For most dogs, a 6 foot leash made of leather or cotton webbing is the best. Chain or nylon leashes are hard to handle and can actually cause injury to you, if they are pulled through your hands.

You may also be tempted to use one of those retractable leashes that allow your dog, by pulling on the leash, to get further away--these are NEVER recommended for training! Reread the last sentence and notice that the dog gets a reward (more leash) by PULLING on the leash! In addition, the plastic handle is easily jerked from a relaxed hand and then the dog finds itself “chased” by a noisy, scary, bouncing handle. This can cause a panicked animal to bolt, even into traffic.

If you would like more specific training information and tips please go to the Iowa County Humane Society website, where you can contact one of our experienced trainers for one-on-one advice!

Happy training and remember to THINK POSITIVE!!

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