

Training Myths explained using knowledge gained from the study and practice of training dogs using a variety of methods – by Chris Puls www.DogScouts.org

"I have to show my dog I am the boss"

The theory of "dominance" and "submission" came mostly from a flawed study of captive wolves. A wolf pack in the wild is a family (parents and off-spring.) The wolves studied in a small space were adults that didn't grow up together. Their behavior was very different from an unconfined wolf pack. In a wild pack, the parents often let the youngsters do the hunting (and eat first), they take turns being the lead dog when they travel, the parents do not dictate to the youngsters where they sleep, when they eat, or if they should sit or lie down.



Also, wolves raised from birth with humans can't be tamed and domesticated to anywhere near the level of a pet dog. Once they reach maturity, if they sense illness or injury in the human, they will likely try to kill that human. Be thankful your dog is NOT a wolf!



It is now believed that dogs evolved over a relatively small number of generations because of human garbage pits. Those wolves that didn't run away as far or stay away as long when humans visited the garbage pits, were better fed and able to reproduce (and survive) better than their more flighty and reactive relatives.

This theory was generated when a fox breeder found that if he only bred the captive foxes that didn't run away from him or try to bite him, his foxes (in just 20 generations) developed floppy ears, multi-color (piebald) short fur (image a), curly tails and acted very much like a friendly domestic dog (image b).



Foxes are in the same canid family as dogs. It is believed that this "selective breeding" the wolves did on their own around the garbage pits is what created the physical and behavioral changes we now know as dogs which humans then domesticated. This also explains why dogs left to breed on their own, such as village dogs in Africa, have very similar physical characteristics to the foxes the breeder got.

So trying to dominate and boss around your dog is not the best way to communicate, when it is actually FOOD (the garbage pits) that has driven the creation of the species. Dogs don't like or respect an overbearing boss anymore than humans do. They start looking for ways to "get around" the rules and punishments.

This doesn't mean there are no rules the dog needs to follow or that they don't need to be taught manners. But you can teach them what you want by taking the role of a fair leader and a teacher/parent. You don't need force or dominance to communicate what you want your dog to do.

"If I use food to train, I'll always need to carry food (or a clicker)"

Anything the dog likes can be used as a reward. See the list of over 107 possible rewards your dog might be willing to work for. http://www.dogscouttroop107.com/uploads/Rewards_What_Rewards.pdf Once you dog knows a cue, you can use just about any reward on the list that your dog likes. But it is easiest to TEACH new cues by using food.

This allows the dog to get in several repetitions one right after another. But if your dog loves toys more than food, you could certainly use toys to train. It just takes longer because you have to play for a bit each time the dog gets it right. For many behaviors, you can use "life rewards." For example the "sit"



cue can be taught to any active dog. If the dog wants to go outside, he has to sit before you'll open the door. If he wants his dinner bowl put on the floor, he has to sit first. If he wants you to throw the ball, he has to sit first. You can switch sit in this example for several other behaviors (stand, lie down, back-up, look at me, spin, speak, etc.) If you are giving your dog something he wants, you are rewarding **some** behavior. Just start being more aware of what you are rewarding and be sure it's a behavior you want.



As with food, using a clicker to TEACH a new cue works fastest. It's scientifically proven. But once the dog knows the cue, you can use a word, like "yes" or "good," in place of the clicker device. If you choose to use a word though, keep it as short as possible. If you use "Gooooood Dooog" (good dog) then what behavior are you telling the dog you liked? The one he was doing when you first started the words or the ones he did during the words? They all get rewarded. Keep the word or sound as short as possible to limit the number of behaviors the dog can do during the sound. By the way, deaf dogs can be trained using the flash of a flashlight in place of a click or word.

"My dog should do what I ask because he loves me" or "My dog should work for just petting and praise"

Once a dog learns and really knows what a signal for a behavior means, then petting and praise may be all the reward he needs. But learning something new is stressful and hard. There might also be some distractions around that the dog will find more interesting. So when you are teaching the dog a new cue, you need something the dog really wants so you can create motivation for him to learn.



Dogs do what "works" FOR THEM. If it also pleases you in the process (which means punishment is less likely) it's a bonus. If a dog gets a reward, then punishment can't take away that reward. If the dog raids the trash or counter top and gets food, a punishment doesn't take away the pleasure of that reward. It could, however, teach the dog that it's not **safe** to raid the trash when a human is present to catch him. Preventing the dog from being able to reward himself is a better approach. Don't leave food out, secure the garbage can and/or confine the dog.

So why does punishment get a dog to do as we ask? Because what the dog **wants** is to avoid the punishment. The avoidance is the motivator. Even with reward based training, the dog is motivated by two things: wanting to avoid the removal of the good thing and the ability to get the reward if he does the behavior. There are several reasons the dog might not try to avoid the punishment:

- the "reward" is something he doesn't care if he gets or not
- the reward is something he can get without doing the requested behavior
- the punishment that might result is not strong enough to be seen as a bad thing by the dog
- the dog doesn't understand the threat being used (a hand raised over a dog that has never been struck has little if any meaning.)

If the dog can walk over to a food bowl on the floor and get food anytime he wants, then why should he work hard to get a treat when he can get food for doing nothing? By controlling the food, you control the dog. Instead of letting him decide when he will eat, create meal times. This will increase the value of all food.

If the dog doesn't have a strong desire to get the reward you have to offer (food, toy, praise, etc.), they don't have a strong desire to try to learn what you want them to do. The paycheck has to match the difficulty of the task. If the dog understands what you want and it is easy for the dog to respond, the reward doesn't have to be special. But if you are asking your dog to really think or exert himself, the reward should be special to the dog. It should be something that warrants that much effort to get.

If the dog doesn't see the punishment (yelling, collar pop or shock) as bad enough to avoid, then it's just nagging, not training. When discomfort (created by a choke collar, prong collar or electric collar for

example) is used as a training tool, over time, dogs could either get super sensitive to it or they could learn to tolerate it. The dogs in the first category get fearful or hyper reactive worrying about making a mistake or that a punishment is going to happen. The dogs in the second category tend to need higher and higher levels of pain to get the same response. Some dogs will learn to hate training and try to avoid it (but that brings more punishment), others might use aggression to try to get their feelings across. If pain is involved, training is not likely to be very fun for the one receiving the pain.

I don't WANT my neck yanked today!



So it comes down to deciding if you want your dog to respond as a way to avoid punishment (meaning the dog needs to think you could always be able to deliver the punishment immediately if they don't do it) or do you want your dog to do it to earn a reward (which could be ANYTHING the dog likes, delivered at some point after the behavior is done.) Which dog will be more relaxed and happy to respond?

Here's something to consider:

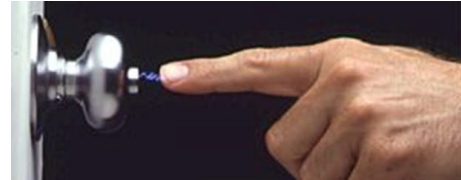
If you had to choose:

a) Doing your job to AVOID getting a shock (how much pain would it take to convince you to continue working?)

-or-

b) Doing your job for a decent paycheck,

Which would you prefer? Both would get the job done. Why is your dog working for you?



"The punishment I use isn't painful to the dog"

If your dog does something you don't like and the result is a punishment, that punishment has to be bad enough (from the dog's perspective) to cause him to avoid it in the future. Punishment training often sets the dog up to be wrong so he can then be punished to help "clarify" what the human wants. Mistakes will happen as part of learning. How those mistakes are handled, what happens when the dog makes a mistake, can make a big difference in his desire to learn new things. If you are clear in explaining what you want AND he has motivation to do it- why would he make a mistake?

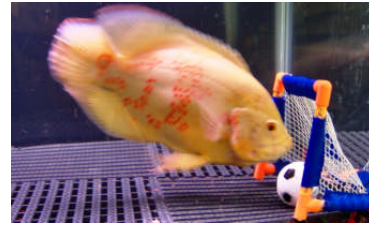


If punishment is the only training tool, then it has to be strong enough that the dog really wants to avoid it. Otherwise, he has no reason to try to learn something new. If the unwanted "bad" behavior is being rewarded in some way (it gets the dog what he wants) then the punishment will have to be raised to overcome the strong desire for the reward. For some dogs, this requires high levels of pain. For others, a frown or harsh word is just as devastating to them. An example of this is jumping up. If the dog gets any attention when he jumps up, that behavior is being rewarded. Preventing the dog from jumping while you let him figure out that sitting gets him attention (& jumping doesn't) will help him learn. Preventing the dog from jumping could be done by tethering the dog to a fixed point so the person can move out of the dog's reach if he jumps. It could also be stepping on a leash the dog is dragging which is attached to the front ring of a regular harness. Or having the person behind a door that they only open if the dog is sitting. If the dog jumps up, the person goes out the door.



So, should rewards be mixed with physical punishments? Scientific studies of learning have shown that learning slows down when there is a mix of reward and punishment. The dog still has the fear or hesitation of punishment in the mix, and that makes learning more difficult. Humans

are raised with punishment and the threat of punishment for mistakes, so focusing on the good behaviors and looking for stuff to reward is a hard concept to practice at times. But training with only rewards has been proven to work in many species including goldfish, pocket pets, cats, dogs, livestock, zoo animals, aquatic animals (even dolphins swimming free in the ocean taught to find mines), horses, and even people! So if you are willing to learn the skills needed, you can teach your dog to do anything he is physically able to do, without even putting on a collar and leash!



A side benefit is that if you make a training mistake (as everyone does) your dog will not be any worse off if he misses a reward. But if you make a mistake and apply a strong correction at the wrong time, it could cause behavior problems that could last the lifetime of the dog.

"Positive training means letting the dog do whatever he wants"

Dogs are not born knowing how most people want their pets to behave. On the contrary, most of the things we ask of our dogs are in direct conflict with what comes naturally. But the dog needs to have rules established to live peaceably with humans. Things like no jumping on people, not stealing food off your plate, being able to lie still and relax. However, the way those rules are taught to the dog does not have to involve pain or a punishment the dog tries to avoid.

Instead of seeing a behavior problem as:

"I want him to stop whatever."

See it instead as:

"I want him to do _____ instead." (Fill in that blank with something the dog **should** do.)



Some examples:

sitting to greet = Not jumping up
choosing to keep the leash loose = Not pulling on leash
coming when called = Not running away from you
looking at you = Not staring or barking at other dogs

By focusing on what you WANT your dog to do, you can reward the dog for those correct behaviors. While the dog is learning a new way to respond to a certain situation (a greeting, a dog going by, going for a walk) you'll need to use prevention and/or redirection as much as possible. This means that you want to help the dog get it right. Set-up the training so the dog is most likely to do the correct behavior and get a reward. This will create a positive association with the new reaction/behavior. Through repetition, a new habit is formed. Good habits are just as hard to break as bad ones. But they also take some time to form through repeated use. If you are using correction to train a behavior, how many times do you have to correct the dog before he has the right behavior as a habit? It's likely a similar number of times unless the punishment is severe enough to create a strong avoidance. If you have to repeat it the same number of times, wouldn't it be nice if the dog enjoyed doing as you asked instead of being forced to do it?

"My puppy is friendly so he/she doesn't need training or socialization"

Oh if it were only that easy!! ALL PUPPIES NEED SOCIALIZATION AND TRAINING! Puppies are not born knowing the rules of the house and human society. They have no idea about anything until they have seen/felt/heard or smelled it for themselves! They do come "hard wired" with certain behaviors, but most are the complete opposite to what we want the dog to do. Things like:

- "Chasing fast moving objects is fun and exciting!"
- "Chewing on things feels good",
- "Ripping things up is fun!",



- “Digging is fun!”
- “When I have to potty, I just go where ever I want”
- “If I see something I want, I get it by whatever means necessary (digging, biting, chewing, etc.)”
- “When I’m afraid and can’t get away, I’ll bark and act ferocious to scare it away”
- “If it doesn’t go away, I’ll bite it!”



These are just a few NORMAL dog behaviors. So it’s easy to see why it’s important to do some training. By teaching the puppy what you WANT him to do and rewarding him for doing it, you can avoid the need for punishment.

If you fail to introduce your puppy (when he is less than 16 weeks old) to as many of the things, types of people, sights, sounds and smells he is likely to encounter in his life, don’t be surprised if your adolescent dog reverts to dog survival law: When I’m afraid and can’t get away, I’ll bark and act ferocious to scare it away and If it doesn’t go away, I’ll bite it! This could be other dogs, people in hats, people in uniforms, strange sights or sounds (which could cause the dog to bite the nearest dog or person out of fear, or bite YOU for not letting them get away!) Get that nice puppy out and about and start on his training now! Or you’ll pay for it later.

“I have a stubborn/hard/aggressive breed, so I have to use punishment”

Force begets force. If you use force with a dog, odds are good the dog will use force in opposition. The “stronger”, “bigger”, “more stubborn” the dog is, the higher the odds are of the dog fighting against you. This causes you to have to escalate the forms of punishment (possibly to abusive levels) to get what you want. It becomes a battle of strength and will power. It doesn’t HAVE to be that way!



Dogs that resist force and get labeled “hard” or “aggressive” are usually the ones that do BEST with reward based methods! Pit bulls, Rottweilers, Akitas, Huskys, Malamutes, Beagles and other hounds all do quite well when you find the pay check (reward) they want! Once you are able to reward them for doing as you ask, they will try their heart out to comply! A puzzle solving game of “what do you need to do to get this reward?” is a much more pleasant training session than one that is a constant struggle leaving both trainer and dog feeling frustrated.

A dog that is motivated by the possibility of a reward to do as you ask is a much more energetic and happy working dog than the one doing the work due to the looming threat of physical punishment. While some dogs can handle the punishments quite well and will work with energy and drive to avoid them, seeing the same dog working for a cherished reward is like night and day! Often, the issue then becomes one of “self-control” training so the dog doesn’t get TOO motivated. There are several articles on the Dog Scout website addressing self-control and indirect access that will teach the dog to maintain a crazy level of drive and focus, while still being able to be responsive, obedient and precise.

“My dog KNOWS how to _____, he’s just being stubborn”

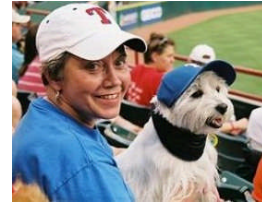


If the dog knows that doing as you ask has and is likely to bring him good things, why would he NOT comply? As a famous trainer whose name escapes me at the moment says: “Do you ever NOT go through an intersection when you get a green light?” If you said yes, then there’s likely a good reason. Maybe you didn’t see it, maybe you were distracted? Maybe you thought it was dangerous to proceed? Maybe the sun was in your eyes? How would/did it feel when the driver behind you thought you were being stubborn and blew his horn at you?

There’s no way to know what is going through a dog’s head. If you give a cue and your dog knows that responding to that cue has brought him high value goodies in the recent past, then give the dog the benefit of the doubt before you “blow your horn”. Maybe the dog missed the cue, maybe he was distracted (yes, a correction

like a horn being blown at you will get his attention back, but does it need to be any more forceful than calling the dog's name?")

Learning to focus around distractions is a learning process. How many training practices and how many visits would it take before you could go to a packed sports stadium, when your favorite home team is playing, to read a book you had to give a report about? It would take an incredible amount of concentration power! Not something you are likely to have without LOTS of practice. Yet people expect their dogs to have that level of ability to work around their favorite distractions with only a few sessions of training or show go's. Some dogs CAN do it, most have a really hard time ignoring those sights, smells, sounds and all their doggie and human friends! If the dog has any fear or uncertainty about the situation or surroundings, then maybe they are stuck at the light and ignoring the cue because they don't feel it's safe to proceed.



“You have to use corrections to train behaviors to a high level”

If the behavior has been taught and trained using only rewards the dog really wants, then the dog is going to be as motivated to do that behavior as possible. The enthusiasm and energy he feels for the reward gets transferred to the behavior. This means he will perform with enthusiasm and drive. The behavior itself then becomes the reward. The dog will comply because it feels good to do it. This is due to the rush of endorphins produced in the brain when the thought of getting a reward is produced. The dog performs it joyfully because it's fun to do what you know how to do well. It is behavior at this level that will hold up under the stress of competition and distractions.

Using the training principles described in the paragraph above, Kathy Sdao has been able to train wild-caught dolphins to work in the open ocean, for long distance/long duration behaviors in the presence of high level distractions. She has no control over their behavior or choices except the promise of a reward for a job well done- and the dolphins comply! They could swim away, catch their own fish, never come back, but they chose to do as she asked just to get a reward. If that is possible, then ANY training of a dog can also be done using only rewards! Use your brain, not pain to train.

