Help your dog choose to be good

"It's a Matter of CHOICE"

Traditional trainers who have not crossed over to the positive reward training yet, are holding out because they don’t like the idea of having to “pay off” behaviors with cookies all the time. I can certainly understand this. I was at this juncture once myself. Having crossed over to a more positive way of training, I can assure you that it is much preferred to the “old” way of doing things.

The other day, I was noticing how seemingly sweet, compliant and considerate my dog was. She did something I hadn’t taught her to do. On her own, she **chose** good behavior over a more natural dog behavior. We were walking up from the woods and rounded the corner, and when I expected her to race ahead, she instead stayed with me. I thought to myself, “Well, isn’t that nice...” She looked up at me “adoringly,” and licked her lips (like she does when she knows she is going to get a cookie). I wondered if she chose the more polite behavior because she thought there might be some reward in store...

It made me think of another author who repeatedly points out dogs are only in it for the cookies. They may **seem** to be consoling you in a time of need. They may appear to be very empathetic over the loss of your boyfriend, but they’re really only cuddling up to you because they think there’s a “cookie” in it for them. I chuckled to myself at the thought, and then came to an important realization. Well, of course she did it for the “cookies!” And, what’s more important is: I DON’T CARE **WHY** she **chooses** the good behavior. I’m just happy that she does. It doesn’t bother me that I have a wonderful dog that makes great **choices** most of the time, because I have given her cookies for being good.

Dogs don’t just go around being “good” and practicing impulse control on their own! Those are not natural dog behaviors. When they make those good **choices**, and look to you for reinforcement (even when there are absolutely no cookies anywhere around), it is because they have had a previous history of being reward for those kinds of choices. Once behavior becomes habit, it is its own reinforcement. While working in my office, if a pen falls off and rolls under my desk, my dog comes running into the room to crawl under there, pick it up and hand it back to me. I don’t have to ask. The behavior has become habit. I just thank her and go on with my work.

The problem with traditional training is that it is based on expunging all of the natural dog behaviors with punishment. Pulling on the leash? Punished. Getting up when told to stay? Punished. Eating garbage? Punished. When a dog sees that he has no choice, and will be punished for a particular behavior, he will avoid that behavior. Just the same as we will avoid exceeding the legal speed limit only if we think a cop is there to catch us. If there’s no cop to catch us, we can **get away** with the bad behavior.

It irks me when people say that their dog does something bad because “he knows he can get away with it,” particularly the people who have TRAINED their dog to look for opportunities to “get away” with something by using punishment as their training method. A “ring wise” dog that breaks the stay “because he knows you can’t punish him” isn’t being spiteful. The dog isn’t staying because he LIKES to. He’s not staying because it is a naturally pleasant doggie behavior. Far from it! He’s surrounded by dogs he doesn’t know, the owner has walked away and he’s in a chaotic environment. He’s only staying because the threat of punishment exists. When that threat is momentarily taken away, the “rules are off” (just like the posted speed limit), and he takes advantage. Don’t blame the dog... YOU are the one that chose punishment as a training method!

A positively trained dog in the same situation does not intrinsically enjoy sitting still any more than the punishment-trained dog. But, the act of staying for extended periods of time has been shown to produce favorable consequences. Getting up from position prior to being cued to do so will produce a definite “no cookie” situation. Staying when the owner leaves the ring, on the other hand, has been proven to result in lots of cookies. A smart dog is going to want to keep himself in the “cookie zone.” There’s nothing good, bad, or spiteful about it. The dog would not be getting away with anything if he were to break the stay. They only thing he would “get away” with is a “no cookie” situation at the end of the exercise (a major bummer for the reward-trained dog.)

Positive Reinforcement trainers have dogs that do not understand the concept of “getting away” with anything. They aren’t working to avoid aversives, so they don’t have to think about how to get away with an “evil deed” without being punished. That concept doesn’t exist in their little minds. Instead, they are trained by being provided with pleasant consequences for making good choices. So the reward history has been established to have “good” choices produce favorable outcomes. Sure, they’re constantly thinking, “Could this be a ‘cookie’ situation?” But what’s wrong with that? At least I don’t have a dog making poor choices because he knows he can “get away” with something. Why on earth would the dog ever willingly **choose** a “no cookie” situation over a potentially rewardable **choice**?  As long as the reward (the “cookie”) is something the dog is motivated to try and get, he has no reason to not want to do the behavior that might bring it to him!

If all dog trainers would just stop thinking about trying to expunge naughty or unacceptable (normal) dog behaviors, and think instead about how to foster good behavior all the time by rewarding good **choices**, we wouldn’t need dog training classes at all! All of our dogs would be well behaved, and have only good habits. They would all control their doggie impulses, and look to us whenever there is a question of how to behave.

I’m proud of my dog. I can take her anywhere and she usually does not embarrass me.  She consistently makes good choices, which have become habit.  I don’t have to carry a treat bag around to get her to choose appropriate behavior.  Coming from a traditional training background, I can appreciate how much more pleasant it is to have a dog who acts like my child.  I never raise my voice or yell at her (what’s the point in that?—Dogs aren’t command driven; they are consequence driven).  She doesn’t know that bad choices exist.  All of those unrewarded behaviors are long gone by the wayside.  Her mission in life is to stay in the “cookie zone” (seeking potentially rewardable situations), and that makes for a very enjoyable relationship.

Copyright 2014. Dog Scouts of America. All rights reserved.