



Behavior Modification

The time period encompassing the first 20 weeks of life is referred to as the imprinting stage. During this period, the young canine is learning what works for him and what does not. Either through a genetic propensity, a learned behavior through association, or a combination of both, the dog may react to training with an unwanted behavior. *Fixing dogs* requires knowledge of canine behavior and throwing away the misguided concept that dogs are people in fur coats. They are dogs – they respond like dogs, and they learn like dogs.

In understanding canine behavior, a high percentage of dogs can be rehabilitated, and undesirable behavioral patterns can be degraded to make the dog a better companion, family member, and hunting partner.

Canine behaviors that owners often wish to alter run the gamut from aggression toward people and/or dogs to a lack of effort in training. Dogs

use *flight, fight, fakery, and freeze* as escape patterns to avoid having to comply with commands. The dog must learn that these four “Fs” do not work for him.

What will work for him is giving an effort to respond to a *known* command in a timely fashion. If a command is not learned, the dog has no chance of succeeding. The dog needs to understand the command in order to be able to comply. “Get away from my new boots” is a command the owner is clear about, but the dog does not understand. A command must be taught, and owners should ensure that the dog fully knows what the command means in order to give an effort to comply in a timely manner.

There is a common misperception that if owners simply shower the dog with affection and give free treats for no performance of a specific effort, then the dog will try to please the owner by responding to the owner’s commands.

Such thinking will not develop a dog that will respond to the “here” command when chasing a pheasant to the distant horizon. A program based on proven canine modification and training methods is the only blueprint that will guarantee success.

In order to degrade established, unacceptable behaviors and create new behavioral patterns, owners need to understand when and how to apply positive reinforcement. However, positive reinforcement is only part of the equation. Owners must also understand when and how to apply negative consequences to an undesired behavior. The unwillingness of some people to establish an association in the dog’s mind that a *specific* behavior causes a negative effect guarantees that the dog will not make an effort to respond to a known command or cue in a timely manner. A dog will display symptoms of a lack of confidence, confusion, and apprehension immediately following

the administration of punishment. This is a normal response, and in a sound training program the dog recovers quickly, learns from his mistake, and continues with new learning.

Positive reinforcement is administered to maintain and strengthen desired behaviors. In training a dog to recall, for example, the dog should be rewarded every time he offers the behavior in the initial stages of training. Once the desired response of giving an effort to respond in a timely manner is reliable, we would not have to reward every time. However, the trainer should continue to reward sometimes when the dog responds to the command. A dog will continue to offer the desired behavior as long as he believes he may be rewarded. If rewards are extinguished altogether, the dog will lose the motivation to try.

I used the word *punishment* previously. In some dog owners' circles, the word *punishment* is viewed as a four-letter word. The use of positive reinforcement only is preached. A

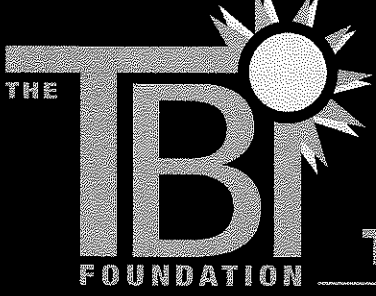
negative consequence to an undesired behavior coupled with positive reinforcement for the contrasting desired behavior is the magic formula. When I refer to punishment, I am referring to an effect that follows a cause (the undesired behavior) that is impressionable enough to inhibit the behavior from occurring in the future. The consequences must be impressionable and meaningful if the behavior is to be eliminated in the future.

Bluffs do not work. The dog will call a bluff, and the result is inconsistency of giving an effort to respond to a known command in a timely manner. If someone were speeding through town and the police pulled the driver over and yelled, "No," but did not write out a ticket, there would be no meaningful consequence. There has to be a consequence perceived by the dog in order to develop reliability of complying with a command or cue in a timely manner.


My recommended method for developing a puppy or rehabilitation for an older dog is the same. I establish the

understanding of the desired behavior such as recalling via the identification and reward. I use a clicker to identify the desired behavior as the behavior is occurring and then reward the behavior with a piece of food. Food is a bigger motivator to the dog than praise. Once the dog is reliably offering the desired behavior in order to receive a paycheck, I introduce the command while the dog is exhibiting the behavior. Once the dog responds in yard training 80 percent of the time, I introduce the dog to the e-collar in a proper e-collar conditioning program. The e-collar is our final bridge to generalizing the command in the field. ●

Check out George's video training series (see ad in this issue), which covers everything you need to know to take your retriever from a pup to a finished upland hunter. For more information on The George Hickox School of Dog Training for Owners and their Dogs, and Stonecreek pointers and Labrador retrievers, check out www.georgehickox.com.










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