



How Dogs Learn

Operant Conditioning

Ever wonder how dogs (and all species) learn? The scientific term is called operant conditioning. But let's keep it simple for now.

Being a canine forced to adapt to an unnatural modern society, it can be challenging for young or unsocialized dogs to understand the consequences of their actions. As a responsible dog owner, it's your role to help your dog navigate the world. This involves understanding how dogs learn and communicate so you can be successful with teaching them.

4 Key Principles of Learning

Consistency & Fairness

Learning involves providing consistent feedback 100% of the time. Your dog will only be as consistent as you are, so be a good role model.

Human Example: Being consistent with exercise to meet health goals.


Dog Example: Being consistent with not letting your dog move forward with tension on the leash.

Reinforcement

When a behavior occurs and it is reinforced or rewarded, the behavior is more likely to happen again in the future. Reinforcement also builds motivation for your dog to work and listen to you as well as builds value in your relationship with them.

Human Example: When you pay your bill on time you are rewarded with good credit and avoid undesirable fee's to encourage you to continue to timely payments.

Dog Example: When you reward your dog with attention after they sit to encourage a a polite way to ask for attention in the future.



Corrections

When a behavior occurs and it is discouraged or corrected, the behavior is less likely to happen again in the future. Learning when, how and why to correct a dog is just as important as reinforcement.

Human Example: When you don't pay your bill on time the consequence is bad credit and a fee to discourage you from missing payments.

Dog Example: When your dog jumps at you for attention the consequences is a leash pressure and loses the freedom to access you for attention (ie. put away on a tether or pen).

Management

When a behavior is prevented from happening, we call this management. No learning occurs, and no new habits are created.

Human Example: When you practice on stage without an audience and a controlled set before doing the main Broadway show.

Dog Example: Practicing calm behind a baby gate before allowing a greeting.

Applying these Principles



Proper Management

Preventing situations where bad behaviors can occur by using supervision or barriers. This is key to help set the dog up for success until they are ready for that challenge level of an environment.



Discouraging Bad Behaviours

Correcting actions you want to see less of. Consequences are a key piece when learning about self reinforcing behaviours that dogs naturally practice.



Rewarding Good Behaviours

Reinforcing actions you want to see more of. This is key if you want to advance your dog to distracting environments and advanced behaviours.