

## **Behavior Solutions: How Dogs Learn**

When you were in school you learned new things largely through example, practice, and trial and error. You were able to gauge how well you were doing from feedback from your instructors. When you saw an “A” on your test that you had done well, but if you saw an “F” it meant you probably didn’t know the material as well as you thought and needed to study more. It may surprise you that your dog learns in much the same manner that you do. Like people, dogs need to be shown what is expected of them, as well as consistency and feedback, to learn. Understanding how your dog thinks and learns is one of the first steps in successful training.

### **Conditioning**

From the question, “Why do animals (ourselves included) act the way they do?” the science of behaviorism was born as nineteenth century scientists tried to discover the answer. In many cases, they found that the answer was conditioning. Conditioning is learning that one thing leads to another, and always involves at least two factors: a stimulus (any event that can be perceived with one of the five senses), and a response that is paired or associated with that stimulus. Two forms of conditioning that shaped the way we train our dogs were founded during this time: classical conditioning and operant conditioning.

In classical conditioning, the response to the stimulus is almost always involuntary. This means that the response to the stimulus is one that your dog has no conscience control over. Physiologist Ivan Pavlov experimented with his dogs by ringing a bell before feeding them. The dogs learned that they ate immediately after hearing the bell ring, and

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drooled upon hearing the sound. Pavlov once rang the bell without feeding the dogs and found that the dogs still drooled at the sound of the bell, even without food present.

These dogs weren't born knowing that the sound of a bell meant that it was time to eat, but after enough repetitions of the bell ring being followed by food, the drooling response was paired with the involuntary drooling response.

In operant conditioning, the response to a stimulus is always voluntary. This means that your dog's reaction to the stimulus is consciously controlled. B.F. Skinner studied with pigeons performing a series of movements in order to receive their food reward. Your dog can be taught any number of simple behaviors that can be shaped into more complex actions with this method. When training for agility, your dog is first taught to move through each individual obstacle. Once he becomes proficient at each obstacle, he can then learn how to run through the entire course in any sequence. Putting a series of simple behaviors together to form a more complex action is called chaining.

### **The Big Three**

Timing, consistency, and motivation are essential to teaching your dog anything from houstraining to advanced obedience. The first principle, timing, is important because dogs live in the present. There is a period of approximately 1.5 seconds for your dog to associate a cause with an effect, so you must catch him in the act for a reward or a correction to be meaningful. For example, your dog runs to greet you when you come home from a long day at work. At the same time you notice your plants are dug up and the shredded remains of your couch are scattered all over the floor, so you reprimand him. The last thing your dog was doing was greeting you, so in his mind this is what he

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being punished for. Praise or corrections that happen after a longer period than the 1.5 second window can result in confusion in your dog due to the lag in communication.

Consistency means that you must be very clear in your training. A rule must be a rule always. For example, your dog will not understand the difference if you allow him on the couch when you are at home alone, but don't allow him on the couch when you have company over. If you don't want your dog doing something in certain circumstances, it is best to not allow it at all.

Motivation means that in order to encourage or diminish particular behaviors, the reward or correction must be meaningful to your dog. (The various types of motivations are described in more detail in Reinforcement and Punishment below.) When teaching your dog new exercises, find a reward that is highly appealing to him that makes him want to work for it. Some dogs respond well to praise and petting, while other dogs are more motivated by food or toys, so use whatever works best with your dog. Similarly, corrections for undesirable behaviors should only be enough to lessen or extinguish the particular behavior. Strong verbal cues, shaker jars, a pop on the leash, and even ignoring a behavior are all means to dissuade your dog from undesired behaviors. When your dog stops the undesired behavior, redirect him into a more desirable behavior and reward him. For example when your dog jumps up to greet you, simply ignore him. Then when he stops jumping on you, praise and reward him. Since most dogs are seeking attention with this behavior, you will teach him that he only receives attention when his feet are on the ground, not when he jumps up.

## **Reinforcement**

Reinforcement is a way of strengthening those behaviors you would like your dog to continue performing. There are various types of reinforcement: unconditioned and conditioned, positive and negative. Unconditioned reinforcers are things that your dog instinctively likes and are based on survival (food, water, sex). Giving your dog a treat when he performs the correct behavior is an example of an unconditioned reinforcer. Conditioned reinforcers are things that have been pleasantly paired with unconditioned reinforcers. One example of this would be telling your dog “Good boy” when he does something well. The words by themselves do not mean anything, but paired with a treat, your dog begins to understand this as a reward.

Reinforcements can also be positive or negative, positive meaning to add a stimulus and negative meaning to remove a stimulus. Both positive and negative reinforcement will make a behavior more likely to reoccur. An example of positive reinforcement with an unconditioned reinforcer would be giving your dog a treat when he performs the correct behavior.

Negative reinforcement is the removal of an unpleasant stimulus to interrupt the behavior that is taking place, hopefully resulting in your dog performing the correct behavior. In order for negative reinforcement to work, the initial stimulus must be one that your dog does not like. For example, your dog is outside in the yard while it is raining and he does not like being wet. He finds shelter from the rain in his doghouse. The unpleasant stimulus of getting wet from the rain was removed by going into his doghouse, so he is now more likely to use his doghouse when it rains.

## **Punishment**

Punishment is a means of decreasing or eliminating those behaviors that are undesirable.

Like reinforcement, there are also several forms of punishment: unconditioned and conditioned, positive and negative. It should be noted that punishment is anything that your dog dislikes or finds unpleasant, though it should not be harmful to your dog.

Punishment should never be used as a form of retribution. Never use more punishment than is necessary to achieve the correct reaction from your dog.

Unconditioned punishment is something your dog instinctively dislikes as related to survival (pain, loud noises, loss). An example of an unconditioned punishment for some dogs would be thunder. Conditioned punishment is something that has been paired with an unconditioned punishment. Telling your dog “No” in a loud voice when you have caught him doing something wrong could be a conditioned punishment.

Punishment can also be positive or negative, positive meaning to add a stimulus and negative meaning to remove a stimulus. Both positive and negative punishment will make a behavior less likely to occur, or extinguish entirely. Positive punishment will always be paired with negative reinforcement. For example, you are teaching your dog to heel with the use of a training collar. When he forges ahead of you, the collar creates a mild discomfort (positive punishment). When he stops and comes back to your side, the collar becomes slack, eliminating the discomfort (negative reinforcement). Any punishment that is applied will also be removed.

Negative punishment is to remove something that your dog finds pleasurable. An example would be withholding attention from your dog when he is doing something inappropriate, like begging at the table (this can be likened to a time-out for children). As

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your dog realizes that begging at the table while you are eating will not result in getting anything from your plate, he will eventually stop. If you sometimes do give your dog a tidbit from your plate, it will encourage him to keep begging because it sometimes works to his benefit. For negative punishment to work, you must be consistent and not give your dog any positive reinforcement for the behavior you are trying to extinguish.

### **Tools of the Training Trade**

There are many tools and methods available to help you train your dog. For the best results in your dog, find the method that is best suited to you and your dog's personality. If one method doesn't work, or if you are uncomfortable using one training tool with your dog, try something different. The most important thing is to stay consistent and make training sessions a fun time for your dog by rewarding him when he does well.

### **Friends for Life**

Dogs aren't born knowing what is expected of them by their human families—they must be taught in a way they can understand. At Starmark Animal Behavior Center we believe that a well-behaved and well-trained dog is a happy dog and a better companion. Each dog is unique, and so is his owner. That's why we use a variety of techniques, customizing your dog's training experience to suit his personality and your individual needs. Using our training techniques, which emphasize consistency and patience, you and your canine companion can bridge the communication gap and be friends for life.

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### **Trainer Developed: Academy Tested**

The certified training and behavior specialists at Starmark Academy created this behavior solutions guide with you and your dog's needs in mind. Products mentioned in this guide are available at PETsMART and other pet supply retailers, as well as online at our web site: [www.dogtrainingandboardingaustin.com](http://www.dogtrainingandboardingaustin.com). All products, guides and videos are tested and approved by the training directors of Starmark Academy, our accredited school for professional dog trainers. It is the hands-on experience of our training division, combined with the vast technical knowledge and experience of the Starmark Academy staff that allows us to bring you useful and unique dog training and behavior solutions. We train dogs just like yours every day; we work with pet enthusiasts just like you every day. Thank you for choosing Starmark, the world leader in pet education.

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### **Starmark Academy Trainer Recommended Equipment**

Pro-Training Clicker™—A fast and easy way to teach your dog obedience commands. It's like saying, "Well done," on time, every time your dog does something you like.

Pro-Training Collar™—The training collar that will help you walk your dog instead of your dog walking you. It provides gentle control with an attractive design that works like a training collar without looking like one.

Pro-Training Treats™—Bite-size treats that are perfect as tasty food rewards during training.

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