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Brains over Brawn

Positive waves are everywhere. There is positive thinking, positive aging, and positive parenting, so it's no wonder that positive dog training is flourishing. But what exactly is it and is it merely the latest fad in dog training?

First let me say that positive dog training stands independent from other positive movements, including positive thinking. I can train a dog with positive methods and still have naughty thoughts. Imagining puppy doing hard time pulling carts of dirt because he dug up a flower bed is allowable while training with a positive approach. (The dog may of course find my nasty thoughts extremely rewarding if it is a breed that loves to pull.)

Positive training in its simplest terms means focusing on what you want the dog to do rather than what you don't want it to do. In blunt terms it means never hurting or scaring a dog to teach it something. These defining qualities of positive training were not invented as spin-offs from other positive movements, but rather are based on proven behavioural science. As a dog owner you don't need a deep understanding of the science of animal learning, but some basic ideas will help you understand your dog better and help get the most from your trainer.

In the first issue of VIP I wrote about 2 ways that we know dogs learn: through association and consequence. The second article touched on learning through association as it happens in puppies. Now it's time to touch on consequence learning and why to use primarily positive reinforcement techniques.

The biggest hurdle in moving over to the positive side of dog training is to accept that your dog needs rewards in order to cultivate reliable behaviour. Most dogs are very food motivated, a few are toy motivated and almost none consider praise a sufficient reward on its own. Puppies come with an inherent ability to bond with humans but not with the mythical 'overriding desire to please us' and why should this be upsetting? Though the relationship between people and their dogs is truly deep and profound, it is the presence of rewards that causes behaviour to increase and the presence of punishments that cause behaviours to decrease. Punishment comes in two forms: the taking away of good things (i.e. time-outs) and administering an aversive (something the dog finds unpleasant). I love a good time out but I do not employ aversives. A dog that is reliable without the use of rewards is merely trained to avoid punishers. Even dogs that work for "praise" are often really seeking the words "good dog" as an indicator that they have successfully avoided punishment. This is one of the most basic concepts of animal learning: all sentient beings will seek out rewards and avoid painful or scary aversives. If you don't reward or punish you can't control behaviour.



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Aversives are used less and less in dog training and are not advisable for pet dogs. In order to belong in many of the professional associations such as the APDT or the CAPPDT you must adhere to ethical standards which do not condone the use of aversives. The pitfalls of hurting or scaring a dog are numerous. They can cause aggression because fear is the prime motivator in training with aversives and fear is the number one cause of aggressive behaviour. Punishers also do not indicate to the dog what they should do. Imagine being told all the time what not to do. It is stressful at best to try and guess what is safe to do. Aversive type punishment must be executed with perfect timing, intensity, regularity and not be associated with you in order to have any chance for success. It must also quickly and permanently change unwanted behaviour. It is not an outlet for the owner to feel better because he has punished the dog. If it does not suppress the behaviour it is just plain abuse.

The reasons to choose positive reinforcement based training are countless. First, it actually helps dogs learn faster. They offer more behaviours because they are trying to figure out how to get that reward. As it approaches feeding time in my house, my dog begins to offer behaviours freely to inspire his dinner to arrive. Because I think this is entertaining I often reinforce him by paying attention and then eventually feeding him. I usually want a routine of a least 3 different behaviours. So he will just start throwing behaviours such as sits, back-ups, or rollovers. A dog trained with punishment rarely offers up such amusement. Positive reinforcement trained dogs are motivated, deeply entertaining creatures that enjoy the training process and trust their trainers.

The second key reason (and perhaps the most important) is that it has no aggression risks. Thirdly it is easier to teach complicated behaviours. Finally it fits in with many families philosophies about parenting and being in the world. If you would like to raise your children to be non-violent then training with these methods makes perfect sense. If the idea of hurting or scaring your dog is off-putting, or if you like to use your brains over brawn then this method is also a good choice.

If a killer whale can be trained without a choke chain why on earth would we need them on our dogs? Dogs have been trained with positive techniques for police work, film work and search and rescue to the highest standards. Positive training is not a fad. It is the smart way to train. If it is good enough for police dogs and search and rescue dogs it should be good enough for any canine family member. If you are interested in how a police dog trainer uses positive training there is a workshop scheduled September 9-11 2006 with Steve White, K9 Master Trainer. For more information email or check my website at www.smartdogtraining.ca