



Why We Like Dog-Friendly Training

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It should be obvious that a humane society training program emphasizes dog-friendly methods, but what really is dog-friendly?

According to the Association of Pet Dog Trainers, “Dog-friendly training is training that utilizes primarily positive reinforcement; secondarily negative punishment, and only occasionally, rarely, and/or as a last resort includes positive punishment and/or negative reinforcement.”

The International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants advocates that training methods be LIMA, which stands for “Least Invasive, Minimally Aversive.”

Let’s do a little interpretation of what these statements mean. In behavior terminology, “positive reinforcement” always means adding something good such as giving rewards. Rewards can be anything that makes the dog really happy and makes a behavior you reward happen again and again. I once worked with a dog that didn’t seem to like anything, but his person mentioned that he seemed to like sauerkraut. We found out this dog would do anything for a piece of sauerkraut. Training him got a little messy, but train him, we did – with the sauerkraut.

“Negative punishment” means taking away something good, as in a time out or holding back on a treat or toy. It’s a strange term but that’s what it’s called. It assumes that something good is being offered. “Positive punishment” is anything but positive; in fact it means adding something bad, often something that causes pain, like a jerk on a choke or prong collar, or a shock from an electronic collar. Positive punishment is tricky to use effectively. It can drift toward abuse if not used correctly and it is very difficult to just punish a little piece of behavior. While it’s designed to decrease a behavior, the most likely result is that it decreases all behavior and creates fear and avoidance of the person using it as a side effect.

“Negative reinforcement” means taking away something bad or unpleasant. It requires that something unpleasant be happening in order for it to be taken away. However, there are some healthy and gentle uses of negative reinforcement being explored in universities that look promising in helping dogs with aggression problems learn new behavior options and relaxation.

Dog-friendly training that primarily uses positive reinforcement and negative punishment (time outs, withholding rewards) focuses on encouraging the behaviors you want your in dog, instead of trying to get rid of what you don’t want. When you focus on rewarding what you want, you will very often find that what you don’t want just slips away. Reinforcement is a powerful tool in dealing with animals, people, and organizations. Focusing on reinforcement opens up many avenues one may not have explored if one was focusing on getting rid of undesirable behavior.

I started using positive reinforcement many years ago in training both my own dogs and students' dogs. I have never looked back. At the time, I discovered a couple of really great books that brought the concept home to me and also helped me use the concept with the people around me. "Don't Shoot the Dog" by Karen Pryor is a delight. Another of my favorites is "Other People's Habits" by Aubrey Daniels. Dr. Daniels is a corporate consultant specializing in changing human behavior through positive reinforcement. My favorite quote, "Behavior goes where reinforcement flows" comes from this book.

We like dog-friendly training because of the way it makes you think and the way it allows you to discover that your pet has a voice, too. Dogs (and cats and other species as well) are very good at figuring out what works. Gentle guidance and positive training build trust, and a rich, interactive relationship with your pet. Dogs who have fun learning from you and with you are always willing to please and are welcome everywhere.