

LEARNING THEORY

Every single creature on earth learns the same way. Whether you are training dolphins, tigers, killer whales, mice, betta fish, or chickens, learning theory holds true for all creatures with a functional brain. The motivations change from species to species and even environment to environment, but the way to shape behaviour remains the same.

Learning happens via two modalities. It is impossible to separate them and both are happening simultaneously no matter what. This means we need to be cognizant of both when training to ensure that the dog is learning the behaviour we intend and not making unwanted associations at the same time.

Let's take leash walking as an example.

We get a puppy and put them on a harness and leash and head out to socialize and explore. They are very busy sniffing and running and generally having a good time. They love going for walks, because it is a big world and they want to see all of it. Very soon, this puppy becomes bigger and the pulling becomes a real problem. You think to yourself, this puppy is going to be 120lbs and will be a total disaster to walk.

After talking to a pet store employee and watching a few reels, you decide a prong collar will teach that puppy to walk nicer and stop pulling. If you have the lack of empathy to use Positive Punishment correctly (see [Operant Conditioning](#) below) the first few times you yank on that leash, the puppy screams out. The puppy quickly becomes too afraid to pull and it looks like you have successfully done the job.

Until they see their friends on the walk. That dog they played with yesterday or the child that fed them a treat. Then they get excited and forget their little heads and need another reminder. In that moment, [Classical Conditioning](#) kicks in. The associative learning that is happening at the same time. That pain quickly becomes associated with the things they wanted to go see and would pull towards as the excitement causes them to forget about the consequences of pulling for a moment.

They start to feel a lot differently towards those situations and get progressively more frustrated. After all, it hurts when they see those things. That frustration leads to progressively more aggressive responses as the dog tries to keep those people or object away. Because the problem is, we cannot control that association. Often that dog is with his family's children. Does your dog associate the pain with the other dog, the children, that house, the fire hydrant in front of the home, white trucks? You have no control over that association. For this reason alone Positive Punishment is very dangerous to use.

Another aspect to consider is that often, the pain, frustration or fear becomes associated with their handlers. Owner directed aggression is incredibly common when using positive punishment as the one constant with they feel it, is you.

In order for punishment to be effective, it needs three things.

1. **Consistency** - It has to happen every single time the wrong behaviour happens. It is so confusing for the poor pup if sometimes they are punished for a behaviour and sometimes not.
2. **Timing** - Punishment or rewards must happen within 1 second of the behaviour so they can correctly link the behaviour to the consequences. Yelling at your dog for peeing on the rug while you are at work has no correlation. The dog is left guessing why you are so mad.
3. **Intensity** - Punishment has to be intense enough to stop the behaviour the first time and remain at that intensity without traumatizing the dog. Each dog will have a different threshold for punishment tolerance. Good luck trying to work that out. Their tolerance changes from day to day, environment to environment and situation to situation.

More often than not, people do not have the heart to hurt their puppy or even their adult dog. Most people get a dog for love and companionship. They are often led to believe that they are doing their dog a kindness by hurting them as the dog will gain more freedom or be able to go more places. What happens to those dogs that you put the prong or shock collar on and don't have the heart to dial up the pain?

The dog starts to build a "punishment callous". This is where the dog can learn to tolerate a mild pain to get what they want. So then you dial up a little more or yank a little harder. Then the dog learns to tolerate that. So you dial it up more. You begin to chase that tolerance and before you know it, you are really getting into abusive territory. Some behaviourists would argue that the use of positive punishment to train a dog meets the definition of abuse flat out.

So what are we to do? There has to be consequences for poor behaviour. Of course there does. There is a whole other quadrant of operant conditioning called Negative Punishment, which arguably sounds worse, but is better.

If we teach the puppy instead that walking with us, they still get to sniff all the sniffs, see all the things and as long as they don't pull, can go meet up with their friends or see their favourite people, they quickly learn how to get what they want while giving you what you need. Negative punishment means we remove the reinforcement they get from the behaviour. So, if they are pulling, they desire to continue going in that direction. Not only does that become the reinforcement for walking with a slack leash, but when they pull, they find themselves at a standstill, not able to go where they want.

Positive punishment only teaches a dog what not to do. It does not teach them what to do instead. The fallout from using pain, fear and intimidation is really clear to most of us with a lot of experience and education, but is not often linked in the minds of owners.

So while the dog has stopped pulling, you have created a new frustration and pain derived problem we like to call reactivity. You have eroded the sociability of the dog. You have damaged your relationship in the meantime. And that is all if you have excellent timing and precision. If you don't, the dog is never really sure when the punishment is coming and lives in constant fear. This creates an anxiety that makes a dog very difficult to live with.

Dogs have a choice of five responses when it comes to stress. Fight, flight, freeze, fawn or fool around. Quite often people will tell me their dog is so silly on their prong and they often get more goofy on it. That would be one of the responses to stress. Dogs that jump all over people and seem to have no control, are often exhibiting a response to pain. They are trying to offer appeasement so the person does not harm them and fool around because they just don't know how to avoid punishment.

Another problem is that the dog can become affiliative to the person causing harm, but take out their anxiety and frustration on other members of the family who may be unwilling to cause them harm or make them fearful. This approach puts children at risk. I hear often that the dog listens better to the man of the house who is willing to enact punishment and doesn't know how to act around the other members of the family.

Teaching a dog what to do instead, using positive reinforcement, is the safest, and most appropriate option for training. We can use negative punishment when the situation calls for it as it does not carry the same risks as positive punishment and negative reinforcement.



OPERANT CONDITIONING



Reinforcement increases behaviour while punishment decreases it.

The plus sign means something is being added and the minus something is being withheld

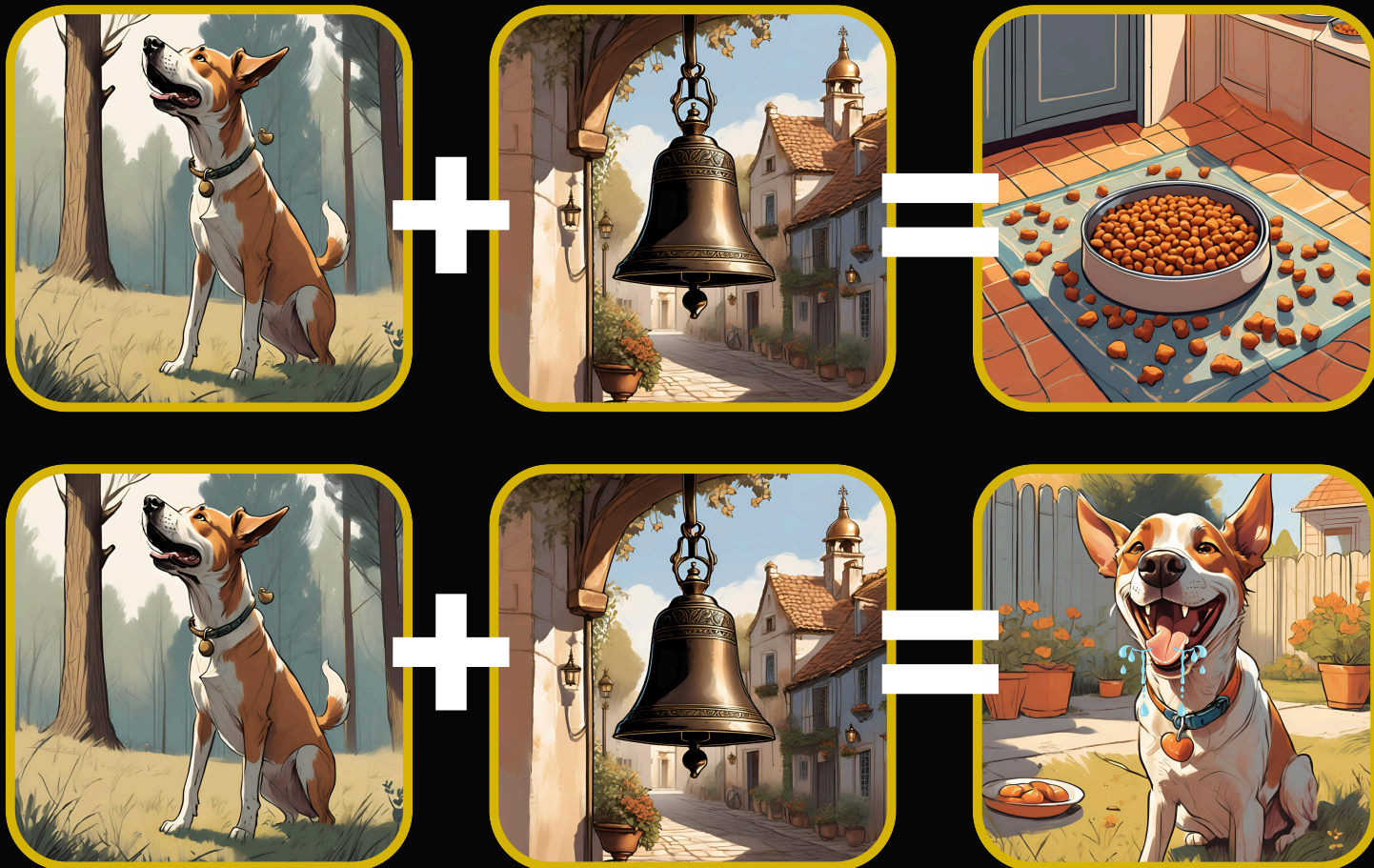


In Force-Free Training, we do not use the quadrants in red. This is because we have many decades of scientific data to tell us the consequences of using them. Positive Punishment and Negative Reinforcement both use avoidance (pain and fear) as a means to an end. This erodes the relationship between dog and handler as well as undermines the confidence of the dog. It creates a way more unstable dog, unsure of who to trust and unsure if their attempted behaviour will cause punishment.

<https://www.companionanimalpsychology.com/2017/10/what-is-positive-punishment-in-dog.html>

CLASSICAL CONDITIONING

Pavlovian Responses



In Classical Conditioning, a previously neutral stimulus (the sound of the bell) happens directly before food is presented. Within very few repetitions, the dog learns to associate the bell with the presentation of food. So much so that even the sound of the bell produces a salivary response, even if food is not present.

Much like the smell of baking sugar cookies will bring you back to your childhood and elicit a nostalgic, happy response. Or a song will bring back your first breakup and make you sad.

These associations also drive behaviour. Let's say the food is presented first followed by the bell. If the sound of the bell scares the dog, it is highly likely the dog will develop an aversion to the food. This is why it is critical in what order we present each stimulus.

We are not always in control of the associations we make and we certainly cannot control them for our dogs. One vet pins a puppy down to do an exam or because they want the puppy to "submit" (always advocate for your dog and DO NOT allow anyone to do this) and henceforth, that puppy hates: all people, people in white coats, people who smell like a vets office, people who wear the cologne of the vet, people with glasses, people with brown hair, etc.

Always ask yourself, what associations is my dog making?