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Your Smart Dog

Cheat Sheet #3 – Make the Science Work FOR You

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Last month's newsletter article, *Cheat Sheet #2 – Powerful Punishment*, gave an overview of punishment – what it is, how it works (or doesn't), and why humans seem to feel compelled to use it. With this series of articles, I'm hoping to give you the knowledge you need to recognize good information from nonsense "dog psychology." In this article, you'll learn more about the science of operant conditioning -- punishment and reinforcement – and how to use that information in your life right now with your own dog.

Last month, I talked about the many pitfalls of punishment, how it can backfire on us, and why it's actually reinforcing for humans to use it on our dogs. Last month's article addressed only one of the two types of punishment. There are two types of punishment: positive (+) punishment and negative (-) punishment. Positive and negative in this instance are like the mathematical definitions – **positive** means you're **adding** something to the situation, while **negative** means you're **taking** something away. Remember back when you were a child and you got in trouble? Usually one of two things happened: (1) your privileges were taken away (negative punishment) or (2) you were given extra chores (positive punishment). Last month's article addressed only positive punishment because it's the type that most dog owners (mis)use.

The upside to negative punishment is that it's less damaging to your relationship [with your dog] than positive punishment.

To be clear, negative punishment also results in a decrease in behavior, just like positive punishment. The upside to negative punishment is that it's less damaging to your relationship than positive

punishment. Here's an example to help you get your mind around this somewhat confusing concept:

Your dog jumps on you every time you come home. Your dog is jumping to get attention from you. So to reduce the jumping, you need to remove the reward – YOU. The new situation looks like this: every time the dog jumps on you, turn around and leave. This is negative punishment – you are taking the reward (you!) away from the dog as a result of his behavior (jumping on you).

**BEHAVIOR THAT IS REINFORCED
WILL BE REPEATED.**

That's very different from kneeling the dog in his chest or sharply squeezing his paws when he jumps on you. Those are examples of positive punishment – adding something (discomfort) to get rid of the jumping. Can you see the big difference between the two? The dog associates discomfort with you when you use positive punishment. But when you simply walk away when your dog jumps, you reduce the jumping and your good relationship stays intact. It's much clearer to the dog that *his actions* are the reason you're leaving.

With the distinction between positive and negative punishment clear in your mind, let's go through a couple of real-life examples to really bring this difference home.

YOUR DOG: Pulls on the Leash

YOUR CHOICES:

Give your dog a tasty treat when the leash is slack. (*Reinforcement*)

Stop dead in your tracks when the leash is tight and don't allow the dog to move forward. (*Negative punishment*)

Yank hard on the leash every time it's tight. (*Positive punishment*)



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YOUR DOG: Bugs You for Attention

YOUR CHOICES:

Wait him out (don't respond to his solicitation for attention) and when he finally stops bugging you, tell him good dog and then give him attention. Just as important: give him attention before he even gets a chance to bug you! (*Reinforcement*)

Get up and leave the room when he bugs you. (*Negative punishment*)

Yell at him when he bugs you. (*Positive punishment*)

See how easy it is to get rid of behaviors you don't like with reinforcement and negative punishment? And without any side-effects that chip away at the good, trusting relationship you're striving to build with your dog.

Remember this cardinal rule: Behavior that is reinforced will be repeated.

There isn't a more important nugget of information than this one, so I'll repeat it:

BEHAVIOR THAT IS REINFORCED WILL BE REPEATED.

So if you *think* you've been punishing your dog for jumping (or barking, begging, pulling on the leash, etc.) and the behavior is still there, you haven't been punishing that behavior at all. Somehow you've been reinforcing the behavior. Try replacing the positive punishment from your routine with positive reinforcement instead. That is, reward what you like instead of punishing what you don't like.

I hope this series of articles has given you some ideas on how to modify your dog's behavior without using positive punishment. There are better ways to interact with your dog that don't involve positive punishment. Now have the knowledge to develop a plan to improve your dog's behavior without sacrificing that terrific bond you have with him.

And even better, you know the science behind dog training – it's not mysterious, it's not "an instinct," and it's certainly not dog psychology. It's science, it's backed up with research, and now you can use it with your dog!

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Helping good dogs become great dogs.

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