

Your Smart Dog Balanced Training? What Is It? Does It Work? November 2008

Since childhood, we've heard "Everything in moderation." Or "eat a balanced diet." We've been told how beneficial it is to have a "good balance" between work and home. Dog training hasn't been overlooked – balanced training has become a buzzword in the industry. It sounds good, it makes intuitive sense. But does a balanced trainer get better results?

Generally, a balanced dog trainer uses both corrections (punishment) and reinforcement (rewards) to teach dogs. As a society, we encounter this every day in our school systems, work environment, and everyday lives and we rely more heavily on corrections than on rewards in all those scenarios. For instance, at school kids lose points if they don't turn in their homework (punishment). At work, if you're late, your paycheck will be docked (punishment). And if you speed, you'll get a ticket (punishment). Rare is the teacher who *gives points* to on-time assignments; a boss who *pats you on the back* when you arrive on-time for a week; the police officer who writes an "atta boy" citation for *obeying the law*.

So while it makes perfect sense to us to use both punishment and reward in training, it doesn't actually translate to stellar results in your dog. Why? Let's take a look at balanced training and see why what makes sense doesn't actually work...

Old-fashioned trainers relied heavily on punishment in the early years of dog-training. Either the dog learned what he needed to learn, or he suffered the consequences. Consequences included physically punishing the dog (hitting, kicking, kneeling, shocking, hanging, etc.), as well as implied punishment (yelling, raising a hand or fist, etc.). Dogs learned quickly to do what they were told. Or else. So when push came to shove, the training actually worked – dogs did what people wanted. At least most of the time. Slowly, praise made its way into training. Dogs got verbal "atta boys" when they did something right. They still got punished if they did something wrong, however.

Let's look at this in a human example: your child's teacher uses both reward and punishment in class. A wrong answer gets your child a punishment and a correct answer gets a reward. How often do you think your child will raise his (or her) hand in class? How involved in discussion will your child be? Do you think your child will volunteer guesses? Or will be willing to take a chance on a creative answer? Probably not.

Why won't your child want to participate? The teacher is offering opportunity for reward, right? Yes, but there's also the opportunity for punishment. And unless your child is 100% confident that his answer is correct, *it's risky for him to participate* and volunteer that answer. It's safer to do nothing than be wrong.

Now let's take a look at the dog training world. If you put your dog in the same scenario – the correct behavior earns a reward and any incorrect behavior earns punishment – he's likely to do nothing, which according to us is wrong and earns punishment.

It looks like this:
You ask your dog to roll over. He's not 100% sure what "rollover" means and he also knows that guessing is not the best option. So he doesn't move. And what happens? If you believe in balanced training, you'll punish the dog for his incorrect response.

A positive reinforcement trainer doesn't blame or punish the dog for the wrong behavior (or for the absence of a behavior). Instead, a positive reinforcement trainer takes the responsibility for teaching the dog. It's not the fault of the dog, it's the fault of the teacher. Positive reinforcement trainers try to find a different way to teach the behavior.

Behavior science tells us that behaviors that aren't reinforced will go away. This is called extinction. Punishment *merely suppresses* behavior, but it doesn't extinguish it. Think of this in terms



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of a fire at your house: do you want to suppress the fire or extinguish it? I want that fire gone, I want it extinguished! If it's merely suppressed, the fire can (and probably) will come back later. Definitely not what I want!

The following is from a Purdue University website focused on childhood education. These principles also apply directly to our work with our dogs (although I've left the human scenarios in because I think it underscores just how much punishment affects us as well as our dogs).

Punishment merely teaches what NOT to do.

There are an awful lot of things we DON'T want our dog to do. Teaching your dog in this manner could take a long, long time. It's more productive to focus on what you want your dog TO DO.

Punishment often causes avoidance behaviors. The recipient of punishment is likely to avoid both (a) the person who administered the punishment, and (b) the situation in which the punishment was administered. Thus, in schools where the assistant principal is the one whose main job seems to be to administer swats to unruly students, students often avoid the assistant principal. Since parents and teachers (and even assistant principals) are interested in teaching children appropriate behaviors, they make their job considerably more difficult if they must first make the children stop avoiding them before they can initiate positive contacts. Likewise, if children are frightened of school or of staying around the house out of fear of being punished, it will be difficult to help them develop adaptive skills.

Punishment often results in a mere suppression of the undesirable behavior. The punished person discovers that it is advisable to stop doing whatever incurred the punishment, but that the same behavior can be tried again as soon as the punishment becomes less probable. Since punishment merely teaches what not to do and suggests avoidance strategies, the punished person may merely cease the designated behavior until it appears that the aversive situation has been successfully avoided, or until a time when the pleasant results outweigh the aversive results.

Punishment often results in a sort of behavioral constriction. The person who is punished may discover that the safest way to avoid punishment in the

future is to avoid doing anything that even remotely resembles the punished action.

These are only a few of the side-effects associated with punishment. **While balanced training may look appealing at first glance, deeper investigation shows there isn't any good reason to be a balanced trainer.** You can teach your dog all the things he needs to know without adding punishment.

If it can be done, then why are people still using punishment to teach their dogs? Unfortunately, I believe it's because we can. We're physically larger than our dogs and we're able to administer punishment. However, **just because we can administer punishment doesn't mean we should.** Especially since behavior can be taught more efficiently without it. In this instance, I say throw balance out the window – you'll get better behavior (and a better attitude) from your dog without it!

If you need more help, please contact a certified pet dog trainer that uses positive reinforcement, dog-friendly training techniques in your area. If you need help locating a trainer, drop me a line, I'd be happy to help you find a qualified trainer in your area.

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