

OBEDIENCE TRAINING

Learning

Dogs learn from the immediate consequences of their actions. This gives the trainer four ways to influence a dog's behavior, summarized in the following chart:

	GIVE	REMOVE
SOMETHING PLEASANT	<i>REWARD</i> (increases probability of behavior)	<i>"TIME OUT"</i> (decreases probability of behavior)
SOMETHING UNPLEASANT	<i>PUNISHMENT</i> (decreases probability of behavior)	<i>ESCAPE/AVOIDANCE</i> (increases probability of behavior)

What this chart means is that there are 1) good things and 2) bad things and that both these can 1) start and 2) end. Dogs, like all living organisms, are constantly trying to start and keep the good stuff (attention, walks, food, access to dogs, play) and avoid starting or terminate the bad stuff (aversives like pain and startle). If you take control of these things and make them contingent on good behavior, you will control the dog.

Dog Obedience Training

Dog training based on the *tradition* that started in the 1950's relied heavily on aversives such as leash corrections to motivate the dog. Progressive, dog-friendly methods have since developed that make greater and more sophisticated use of reward and reward-removal as principle motivation. The control is as good, and in some cases better than that achieved with traditional methods and avoids the side-effects of aversives.

Reward and Reward Removal

A reward is anything that increases the future probability of the behavior it immediately follows. Examples of likely rewards for dogs are: attention, food, play, walks and access to other dogs. The trainer's timing is everything. Because it's necessary to reward the desired behavior so precisely and it's not always possible to get a treat, pat or toy to the dog fast enough, a key word or sound ("conditioned reinforcer" or "bridging stimulus") that means "you win!" is a useful tool. Another valuable aid is a signal that means "you just lost!" and is called a "No-Reward-Marker (NRM or "Mark"). NRM's require split-second timing just as reward-markers do and are always followed by reward removal.

When training a new behavior, a reward is given for every correct response. After a few repetitions, rewards should not be shown up front but hidden and offered *immediately after* the desired action is performed (or immediately after the bridging stimulus). In later training or maintenance of training, rewards are given intermittently. The craftiest use of intermittent reward is to reward the *best examples* of the behavior. Trainers call this tightening up of reward standards "turning the screws" or "raising the bar."