

How You May Accidentally be Encouraging Bad Behavior with Reinforcement

The doorbell rings, which in many houses prompts the dog to start barking. Then, the barking prompts the owners to start yelling, and instead of stopping — the dog just barks more! Sound familiar? If this scene resembles your house, you aren't alone. This is a common situation where many owners get stuck and frustrated by a behavior, but the dog has no idea they have done anything wrong.



As an unfortunate result, the next time the doorbell rings the above scenario is more than likely to repeat again and again. The dog isn't barking to frustrate their owners, but rather they keep barking because this behavior has been repeated and reinforced. That's why understanding reinforcement history is so important.

What Is Reinforcement Training?

When working with dogs, there are two main kinds of reinforcement: positive reinforcement and negative reinforcement. Positive reinforcement means adding something (food, praise, toys, play, etc.) that our dogs find reinforcing or rewarding to increase the likelihood of behaviors we want. There is also negative reinforcement, which refers to taking away the reinforcer (i.e. whatever it is that your dog wants like attention) to decrease the likelihood of behavior we don't want.

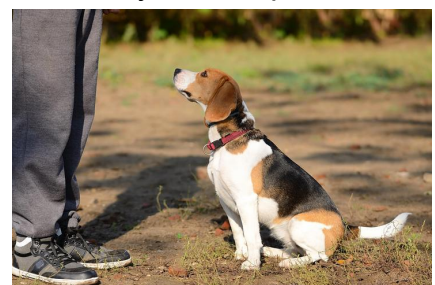
For this purpose, we're focusing on what is positively reinforcing our dogs, as in what will encourage behavior to continue, and how a history of reinforcing behavior will drive both positive and negative behavior in the future.

How Reinforced Behavior Repeats

When thinking about dog behavior, it's important to recognize that any behavior that has been reinforced is most likely to be repeated. For example, when you're teaching your dog to sit, you want to use rewards like treats to teach your dog how to get into the sit position. Every time they do so, they get rewarded. After a few repetitions, most dogs will begin to sit on their own without treats because the behavior has been reinforced.

This happens in training scenarios but also in real life — like the above doorbell example. In that case, the dog's barking is reinforced by the owner's yelling. Your dog doesn't understand what you're saying, they just know that when they "yell," you "yell," and now everyone yells, which is a very fun reinforcing game for your dog. Any behavior that gets reinforced is more likely to be repeated, so we must be careful to try and only reinforce behaviors that we want.

What Is Reinforcement History?



Reinforcement history refers to the frequency or number of times that a particular behavior your dog does has been reinforced. Dogs thrive on routine and reinforcement, so the more they rehearse a behavior, or the more times that behavior has been reinforced, the more likely it is to be repeated.

This can be used to our advantage for training everything from basic manners to advanced sports. Reinforcement history can also work to our disadvantage if we're not thoughtful about what behaviors we're reinforcing, as we can unintentionally reinforce behaviors we don't want.

When thinking about working with your dog through training challenges, it's useful to take a step back and consider what part of the behavior has a history of being reinforced. For example, many dogs automatically sit when they approach someone or when a treat is held out to them. But dogs aren't sitting because "they want to." They're likely sitting because it's a behavior that has been consistently reinforced. As a result, dogs offer it as a default behavior.

Any behavior we want to see more often is behavior that we want to mark and reinforce to our dogs.

Accidental Reinforcements

Sometimes the things we reinforce from our dogs aren't necessarily behaviors that we want. With the barking example, the yapping behavior was getting reinforced with attention. Without intending it, you reinforced that behavior over time. Our dogs are highly tuned in to us, and this makes it easy to accidentally reinforce behaviors.



One way we do this is by providing our dogs with attention or other rewards when they're doing things we don't want them to. Maybe you're eating dinner, and your dog is always underfoot, which bothers you. Your dog follows you around the kitchen, in part because the food you're cooking smells good, but mostly because you often will toss your dog little bits of what you're cooking. Because of that, your dog has learned that being under your feet in the kitchen is a great and highly rewarding place to be.

Another behavior that's easy to accidentally reinforce with attention is your dog jumping up. When your dog jumps up if you pet them, they're receiving positive reinforcement for their behavior. This is fine if you don't mind your dog jumping up. But if it's a behavior you don't want, then you'll want to stop reinforcing it by not giving them attention when they do so.

Changing the Reinforced Behavior

If your dog is doing a behavior you don't like, such as barking when the doorbell rings or packages get delivered, you need to contend with the strong reinforcement history that the dog has developed with this behavior. To do this, it's important to help your dog practice the behavior that you do want. To

change behavior, we want to intervene before the dog starts doing the “bad” behavior without continuing to reinforce it.

If you find yourself in a situation where you realize you’ve accidentally built a reinforcement history for a behavior you don’t want, the easiest way to begin to shift your dog’s behavior is to reinforce a different and incompatible behavior. To do this, we need to get ahead of our dog’s behavior.

For example, if you don’t want your dog to bark at the doorbell, you need to teach them a different behavior. To do this, you’ll want to set up training scenarios where you know someone will be approaching your door. But before that happens, have high value treats ready and away from the door. When the doorbell rings, get your dog’s attention with the treats and lure them to their bed or other location where you want your dog to be.

The more you practice, the more you’ll rebuild a new reinforcement history with this new behavior. Over time you’ll be able to change the behavior of your dog barking at the doorbell. You can do something similar for other unwanted behaviors that have been reinforced.