



News From Sparrows Nest

Teaching A Polite Greeting Though Positive Reinforcement By Sumac Grant-Johnson

There are many misconceptions about positive reinforcement dog training. It may be characterized as just waiting out bad behaviors, just waiting for the dog to choose the appropriate behavior and the absence of boundaries and limitations.

The process of Positive reinforcement training is complex. It creatively sets dogs up to be successful, limits the opportunity for establishing or practicing unwanted behaviors and builds an understanding of expectations and boundaries without the need for harsh correction. By channeling dogs to make the desired choices it gives the trainer the opportunity reinforce the desired behavior with something the dog enjoys. This eliminates or reduces unwanted behavior as the dog will quickly understand what “works”. These methods build a strong relationship between dog and owner. A relationship based on consistency, trust and love.

Take the example of a young dog that jumps on people. Puppies lick their mothers face and receive attention. Most puppy owners pick up their cute new puppies or get on the floor and enjoy wonderful puppy kisses while they lavish their pups with attention. Most puppy owners spend several months offering their puppy this unplanned form of positive reinforcement, attention is earned for being near their face.

Soon puppies grow into adolescent dogs. Most dog owners are now less likely to get down on the floor or lift their dogs to give them attention. These young dogs have been trained so well they will work harder when we do not get down to their level. They will do their best to jump up to perform the behavior their owners have rewarded so lavishly in the past.

Correction or punishment for jumping will usually stop the jumping but it does not resolve the problem. These young dogs do not know an appropriate way to get attention or greet people. Negative approaches will often just lead a dog to replace the jumping with barking or grabbing. A negative method is unfair and will undermine the relationship as the dog becomes confused and frustrated for being punished for doing what had previously been rewarded. This can in turn set back future training and cause additional behavior problems.

A strong positive reinforcement approach to training would consist of two basic components. The major component is to teach the dog what we desire or replace the undesirable behavior with a new one. A polite greeting like a sit would be reinforced with rewards that the dog enjoys. This would be practiced repeatedly and would reduce the desire to jump, bark or grab people for attention. The second component removes all reward or attention for any attempts to jump. This further establishes the dogs desire to eagerly perform the behavior we want in order to receive attention.

Positive reinforcement training has been proven to be so powerful that it is utilized by the top trainers in the world for training that goes way beyond dogs. It is used in zoos and aquariums, in studies with chimpanzees and gorillas, with animal performers and with people who are trying to achieve their business and personal goals.

Dog owners that build a strong relationship with their dogs and harness the strength of Positive Reinforcement find training can mold great behavior. Three steps can be quickly put into place at home. 1. Identify what the dog finds rewarding like treats, toys, petting and verbal praise. 2. Eliminate the dog’s opportunities to practice unwanted behaviors. 3. Become conscious of what is being through daily interactions.

Dog training is complex. It involves an in depth understanding of dog behavior and instincts as well as an extensive variety of training methods. The bigger a trainers bag of tricks and knowledge base the more likely they are to be successful at molding a dog into a loving companion that eagerly performs for because it loves to not because it feels it has to.