

# Introduction to Training Concepts

*"If you don't understand principles, you will be a slave to technique." - Pat Nolan*

## Making your dog an effective learner

Your dog does not share your value system. Your dog can only think and act like a dog. Your dog does not speak English. Your dog is not altruistic or empathetic. Your dog does not do things to please you. Your dog is a liability first and foremost. We have to meet them where they are, and communicate in ways they can understand. Your dog does things for only two reasons: to make something good happen, or to make something bad stop. Your dog can only "know" things by doing them, or having them happen.

### Types of learning

**Conditioning** is involuntary or discovery learning where the situation elicits genetic/instinctual behavior. Your focus in these situations is exposing the dog to the environment and the distractions, and otherwise staying out of the dog's way.

**Training** is a process of intentionally teaching skills that are often irrelevant to the dog, and making them relevant. Your focus in training is shaping behavior using consequences, while controlling the environment and distractions only as much as necessary to help the dog succeed. Dogs learn through association. A series of associations is a pattern. The pattern we are manipulating from the dog's point of view is:

**Action > Memory > Desire**

Any action that creates a good memory will create desire to repeat that action. Any action that creates a bad memory will create desire to avoid that action.

### Dogs need to understand how to get what they want

We use pressure and rewards to train behaviors. For us to be able to use those things to communicate we need to first make sure our dogs understand how to **turn off pressure** and how to **access rewards**.

## Making yourself an effective trainer

The same pattern from our point of view would be

**Stimulus > Behavior > Consequence**

Some event elicits a behavior from the dog, and that leads to an outcome of value. When we apply consequences there are three key considerations.

- **Timing** is important because the consequence must occur quickly after the dog does a behavior for the dog to associate the behavior with the consequence that follows.
- **Motivation** is important because the consequences you use need to matter enough to the dog for them to choose to work for them.
- **Consistency** matters because your dog needs to build a heuristic (rule of thumb, a pattern) that is predictable, and that takes repetition.

## Using Pressure

**Pressure motivates, release educates.** Application of pressure creates a problem for the dog to solve, and pressure turning off tells the dog when the problem has been solved. Take care to remember that **you need to provide motivation (force) and information (duration/direction) when using pressure.** You should have a distinct pressure application for each behavior you teach your dog. Otherwise, you are ignoring the unique advantage leash and collar training has over other modalities. An e-collar can provide force but it provides limited information. For this reason we prefer training with a leash and collar first, then using e-collar to reinforce well known behaviors. This is also why we repeat commands when using e-collar pressure, but do not do that when using the leash.

A good rule of thumb is to only force behaviors that you have seen the dog perform for a reward. This includes the behavior itself, as well as the circumstances under which the behavior is being performed.

## Using Rewards

Rewards come in many forms: food, toys, praise, petting, comfort.

- **Direct rewards** are rewards the dog received while they are engaged in a behavior. Direct rewards can create an outwardly focused dog, and can create stability in a behavior. In our training, we provide direct rewards expecting the dog to remain in the behavior while receiving them.
- **Indirect rewards** are rewards that dogs receive after they exit a behavior. With indirect rewards we expect the dog to exit behavior and get the reward elsewhere. Indirect rewards can create an inwardly focused dog, and can create instability in behavior. Because the dog has to leave the behavior to get an indirect reward, we need a way to clearly identify why the reward event is happening, so we use a marker/clicker to draw attention to the moment that caused the reward event. This is the value of clicker/marker training: it allows for latency between behavior and consequence.

## 3 Action Introduction

All fundamental trained skills fall into one of three categories:

- **Go**
- **Come**
- **Stop**

Focus on those first. Teach complex skills (heeling, retrieving, casting) by isolating their basic parts, working on them separately, and then recombining them. Even simple exercises can always be broken down into smaller parts to help dogs who are confused, or having trouble.

## 3 Phases of Training

- **Teach:** Get the dog to do IT, and then put IT on cue. No distractions.
- **Train:** Reward the dog for getting IT right and correct the dog to help them keep IT right. Just enough distractions to deepen the dog's commitment to the task.
- **Proof:** Use distractions and different environments to deepen the dog's commitment to doing IT. Gradually increasing distractions to the point where your real life expectations are underwhelming.

## Manipulating variables in the proofing process

When we are proofing behaviors there are three variables that affect the complexity of the exercise:

1. **Distance:** Changing distance away from a distraction, or changing your distance from the dog
2. **Duration:** Changing the duration of the behavior, or the duration the dog is subjected to a distraction
3. **Distraction:** Changing the distraction itself or level of intensity of the distraction

It is generally best to change one variable at a time, or lower the difficulty of one variable greatly when we start increasing the difficulty of another variable. Assuming your teaching and training phases were done correctly, do not lower your expectations of behavior for the dog. Instead, simplify the setup of the exercise.

## Managing emotions and mental state

**Dogs learn fastest when they are calm.** If your dog is fearful, anxious, overjoyed, excited, or defensive... being in any of those high arousal states is counterproductive to their ability to process information. So if your training activities are eliciting those emotional states you need to take care in adjusting either your approach, your environment, or your distractions to keep them “under threshold,” which means still calm enough to think their way through a problem rather than just react or freak out about it. We need to build healthy coping skills in our dogs while also making sure we are not contributing to problems with poor training or handling. Since dogs learn through association, it's important to remember they associate emotions with behaviors, places and things. Don't just think about what you want your dog to do. Think about how you want your dog to feel while doing it.

## It is never too early to start!

Many owners avoid obedience until their dog has problems, or has “enough drive to handle it”. The former is usually why they have problems. The latter is only true if your approach to teaching obedience is very unbalanced, and you aren't thoughtful in its application. **Remember that you can work on something, and then leave it alone for a while.** Don't delay your obedience training, just bring it along at an appropriate pace and in balance with drive development. Remember that age does not equal experience; experience equals experience. The goal of all training should be better communication, increased cooperation and reliable and responsible behavior with enthusiasm appropriate to the task. This is true for the dog and the handler. The art in dog training is balancing trade-offs because everything you do has a cost.

*"Half the trouble in dog training is because they learn what we teach them, not what we planned to teach them, or what we hoped to teach them." - Pat Nolan*