

Say “YES” instead of “NO”: Thoughts on Positive Reinforcement Dog Training

by Kerry Mitchell, CPDT-KA, WAG-CT

Part 1

As a certified professional dog trainer, working with dogs has been a passion and an education for me that has evolved over the years. When I started training dogs 30 years ago, we trained dogs by methods similar to those used in the military: we put a chain or prong collar on the dog and jerked hard enough that the dog “listened” when he didn’t do what we wanted him to. If he did it right, we’d give him cookies. Although our hearts sometimes broke for our dogs, we trusted our teachers and found solace in the knowledge that we were doing the right thing.

I remember how, in 1986, Klea, my sweet, gentle, reserved collie would “shut down” with this type of training. She would lick her lips, turn her head away from me, crouch down and refuse to move. “She’s being dominant,” my trainer said. “Jerk harder.” Trusting in the trainer that I was misreading my dog’s signals of distress, my voice got harsher and I jerked harder and even resorted to a prong collar. Klea became less and less responsive to me and eventually I stopped formal training for competition altogether. However, we would still “play train” at home. In these “play training” sessions, her tail came up, she watched me and listened attentively, and responded to even the most complicated “requests” or “cues” with perfection. The moment my voice would change to my formal training tone, however, her body language reflected stress (lip licking, head turns, moving slowly, refusing treats and being unresponsive to my “commands”). It was Klea who convinced me to give up corrective training.

Thankfully, research has shown that training methods that use punishment (harsh, raised voice, verbal corrections such as a loud “UH-UH” and “NO”, jerking or popping the leash using a prong, chain or flat collar, hitting or popping the dog, using spray bottles etc.) are not necessary and can be damaging to your dog both physically and emotionally. Even expert trainers who train war dogs for IED detection and attack are switching to positive methods. Why? Because the war dog and handler must trust each other implicitly and their partnership must be absolute. Like humans, dogs have an emotional center in the brain that is affected by pain, anger and threat and will respond to threats in a variety of ways such as “shutting down”, owner directed aggression, dog-dog aggression, aggression toward strangers, anxiety, and anxiety based behaviors that may show up separate from the actual correction. Examples of anxiety are: self-inflicted lick sores (hot spots), destruction in the home, relieving themselves inside the home, separation anxiety, and difficulty learning.

The trouble with punishment style training is that it works--in the moment. It also comes easily to us and is very rewarding because the dog will often do what we want him to—or at least stop the behavior we want him to stop to avoid further pain or threat thus giving us an immediate sense of accomplishment and satisfaction. But although the dog may stop the behavior that we want him to stop, it doesn’t mean that he has learned anything--a dog’s ability to learn decreases as stress increases. As primates who are hard-wired to shout and use our hands to hit when upset or angry (which translates easily into jerking, popping, smacking or hitting our dogs), we need to retrain ourselves to work with our dogs in a positive way.

Using positive methods is not permissive. The dog is taught clear boundaries that he will consistently adhere to when given strong, benevolent parenting. The difference is that you reward your dog for

what he is doing RIGHT instead of correcting him for what he is doing WRONG. You mark the behaviors you are looking for with “yes” followed by a treat, and by doing this can drop “no” from your vocabulary altogether. And you advocate for him. The outcome is a creative, happy, and enthusiastic dog. He is eager to learn and will make good choices. The trust, relationship and bond that grows between the dog and his family will continue to blossom over a lifetime.

One of the arguments we frequently hear from people who use punishment-based training methods is that they don’t want to “bribe” their dog. However, a bribe is something that is promised to the dog if he does something for us that he doesn’t want to do—no learning occurs when bribing is used. For example, if your dog steals a chicken bone and is running around the house with it, you may be able to bribe him to give it up and thus avert veterinary bills and a very sick dog, by offering him a piece of steak. This would be an appropriate use of bribing. “Rewarding” is paying the dog for a job well done (just as we are paid for the work that we do). The dog executes behaviors he knows quickly and enthusiastically when asked. Learning occurs rapidly. The reward can be anything that the dog finds valuable—verbal or physical praise, toys, play, doing a favorite trick, or food. We often use food initially, as it is something that is easy and quick to administer and that all dogs will work for. However, if the behavior is not completed, the dog does not get the reward. The trainer simply “resets” the dog, changes the criteria for the behavior and tries again. “Luring” is a method where we use food to guide the dog into the behavior or position we are looking for, then reward with the clicker or a verbal marker followed by the food when the dog has completed the action. It is an easy way to show the dog what we want from them.

In my work as a volunteer dog trainer at WHS where I train both dogs and volunteers, I see dogs who are very stressed. Using this type of positive rewards training fosters trust, confidence, and a joy in learning new things. It also helps them start down the road to recovery from the emotional trauma they may have sustained prior to arriving at the shelter. To find a trainer who uses positive rewards training methods in Whatcom County and beyond, check out the WHS website:

<http://whatcomhumane.org/dog-trainers/>

About the author: Kerry Mitchell has been training dogs for almost 30 years. She started working with aggression and complex behavior issues in dogs nine years ago when she adopted Vera, a German Shepherd mix, from WHS. Vera developed many complicated anxiety-based behaviors including dog-dog and human directed aggression which prompted Kerry to start Canine Recovery, a school which dealt specifically with these issues. Since adopting Vera she no longer uses even mild corrections. Vera is now 11 years old and living the life of luxury as a highly trained, retired princess. Kerry is currently working at Tails A Wagging and volunteers 6-8 hours a week at WHS.