

## Kelly Krager

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**From:** Aidan, Positive Petzine [editor@positivepetzine.com]  
**Sent:** Friday, August 24, 2007 9:08 AM  
**To:** Kelly Krager  
**Subject:** [positivepetzine] How to make bad pet behavior Extinct like a Dodo

Hi Kelly, we all know that Consequences can be used to train new behaviours and reduce existing behaviours. But what about **non-consequences**?

Extinction is the process of **not** reinforcing a previously reinforced behaviour.

It involves identifying what the **reinforcer** is for a target behaviour and removing it.

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For a dog who likes to 'counter-surf', i.e check out the kitchen counters looking for food, the reinforcer is easy to identify - **FOOD**.

To solve that sort of problem we need to use extinction. Whenever there is food on the counter, the dog must be doing something else or must be otherwise unable to come into the kitchen. He might be in a crate, or outside, or the kitchen door may be shut, or my favourite - we trained our dog to lie quietly in a designated area and shared a little of the food to reinforce this more acceptable behaviour instead. That way we both got what we wanted and our dog learned a better way to behave in the kitchen.

When we're not cooking, or unable to supervise our dog, we must leave kitchen counters clean. We put away any food, and maybe even wipe the benches clean.

That way, when our dog comes to check out the kitchen counter he will find nothing, and therefore the behaviour will not be reinforced.

**In the short term, the behaviour will get worse. Then it will get better. Then it will go away.**

Beware the gambler's curse - *Variable Schedules of Reinforcement*. This is where we forget one time to clean our benches and our dog finds some food. A Variable Schedule of Reinforcement makes behaviour very resistant to extinction, that is why addicted gamblers will spend every last cent on a poker machine that ultimately gobbles up all their money, paying out only occasionally to keep the gambler addicted.

You can still extinguish behaviour that is on a Variable Schedule of Reinforcement, but it takes longer to do. A common problem is when family don't follow the rules and leave food out on the bench while the dog is unsupervised. You will need to explain extinction and Variable Schedules of Reinforcement so that they understand how important it is. Often it is simply a lack of understanding or communication that results in lack of co-operation.

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So how can you apply Extinction to your pet's behavior problem? **First - identify the reinforcer. Second - remove it.** If you can teach an alternative behavior or provide a more acceptable outlet for the unwanted behavior, then it may speed things up for you.

Another example. Many people complain that their dog raids their rubbish bin. The reinforcer in this case is usually scraps of food or something smelly to play with. How do we remove the reinforcer? We could buy a more secure bin with a lid. We could put the bin in a cupboard. We could move the bin to another room and shut the door so that the dog can't access it.

Any of these options will work, it depends on what suits you and your lifestyle the best. You may have to make a compromise, but that is just part of owning a pet. The joy and companionship they bring more than outweighs the small inconvenience of compromises like these - more so when you come home to a loving pet who has NOT spilled rubbish all over your yard or eaten tonight's dinner, I'm sure you will agree!

Until next time...

Regards,  
Aidan  
Editor

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