

## Kelly Krager

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**From:** Aidan, Positive Petzine [editor@positivepetzine.com]  
**Sent:** Monday, August 20, 2007 12:25 PM  
**To:** Kelly Krager  
**Subject:** [positivepetzine] What exactly is Positive Reinforcement?

Hi Kelly, as promised in the last issue of this e-course today we're going to find out what Positive Reinforcement really is. You've probably heard the term "Reinforcement" before, but do you know what it really means?

Reinforcement is the term behavior analysts use when a behavior has been maintained or increased in frequency, duration or intensity.

An example, a dog learns to sit to be patted, each time he is patted he learns to sit more often or for longer.

This means if you want a dog to keep doing something, or do it more often, more intensely or for longer, that behavior needs to be reinforced.

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The traditional method of reinforcement was to do something the dog didn't like and stop doing it when the dog complied with the command.

These days most dog training professionals use Positive Reinforcement, we give the dog something he wants when he does something we want! This could be a food treat, a game, a toy, access to outdoors, a walk around the neighbourhood, a scratch behind the ear - the list goes on... but mostly we use food because it is convenient and all dogs need to eat!

Sometimes it's not obvious to the dog exactly what we are trying to reinforce, and reinforcement of the desired behaviour does not occur as a result. The easiest solution is to use what behavior analysts call a "bridging stimulus", usually a sound used to mark the target behavior. This can be a simple and consistent "good boy!", but many dog trainers are discovering the advantages of clickers which mark tiny pieces of behaviour very precisely when used correctly. Like most things, it's a case of getting some practise. I liken it to learning how to press the shutter on a camera at the right moment.

(Note: you can get your [Getting Started Clicker Training Kits here.](#))

### **When can we say we have Reinforced behavior?**

By definition, we can only say reinforcement has occurred when we measure the increase or maintenance of a particular behavior.

Scientists would carefully measure behavior, but for most of us we're just happy to make a casual observation that a behavior has indeed been increased or maintained.

Some trainers make the mistake of assuming that behavior has been increased or maintained when in fact it has not.

Just because we have given a dog some praise, a scratch behind the ear, or even a yummy treat, it doesn't mean that the preceding behavior has been reinforced. Only when we can actually observe that a behavior has been increased or maintained can we say that it has been reinforced.

All this might seem very theoretical, but don't worry because there's not too much theory to learn and we've covered the most important stuff in this one lesson.

Next issue we'll look at why positive trainers prefer not to use punishment. The answers might surprise you!

Regards,  
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Editor

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