

Kelly Krager

From: Aidan, Positive Petzine [editor@positivepetzine.com]
Sent: Monday, October 08, 2007 10:16 AM
To: Kelly Krager
Subject: [positivepetzine] Training Sophie with distractions

Hi Kelly, once you leave your house with Sophie, all your training will appear to go down the drain. How do you overcome these distractions? Find out right now!

What is **reinforcement**? Reinforcement is what happens when a behaviour is maintained or increased. Dog training is essentially a progression of reinforcements. Food, toys, play, attention and 'life rewards' such as being let inside or taken for a walk are all potential reinforcers.

Without reinforcement, behavior will never be maintained or increased. This is fine if you want a behavior to disappear - simply stop reinforcing it. But if you **want** a particular behavior, you need to reinforce it.

Most dog trainers these days use food as a reinforcer. It is by no means the only reinforcer, but food is convenient and, let's face it, all dogs need to eat!

So we start off training with food in a quiet, distraction-free area inside the house. We put any other pets out of the room. We turn off the TV. We wait until the kids are in bed. Then we shut the door and train. There are numerous books and articles explaining how to do this, so I won't re-hash the basics.

The problems begin when we get out of that distraction-free environment and into the real world. Here there are other dogs, birds, squirrels, cats, new smells, sights, sounds, people, cars, bikes, postmen - it's all out there! Our training usually starts falling apart once we leave the house.

But it doesn't need to.

The big secret to dog training is to **always set the dog up for success**. If the dog fails, we can't reinforce. If we can't reinforce, behavior can not be maintained or increased. If behavior hasn't been maintained or increased, training has failed.

So we need to set the dog up to succeed. Going too far, too fast will only lead to failure. Allowing too many distractions or too big a distraction too soon is setting our dog up to fail. Without success, we've got nothing to reinforce.

The best way to set our dogs up for success is to control the environment as best we possibly can until they are well and truly proofed and ready for the big wide world.

Let's say we normally train in our kitchen with the door shut. Here's a list of things we can do to set up some low-level distractions:

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1. place a tennis ball in the middle of the floor
2. turn the radio on softly, then turn it up gradually throughout our training session
3. have a friend come into the room with us
4. put a piece of stale dog food on the floor
5. wave our arms around
6. turn the taps on halfway through an exercise
7. whistle a tune
8. roll a tennis ball slowly in front of our dog
9. turn away from our dog

... or any combination of the above.

Remember, the secret is to **always set our dogs up for success**, so that we may reinforce (maintain or increase) their good behavior.

If any of the distractions on that list are too much, then our dog fails. Just because I wrote it on my list of low-level distractions doesn't mean that your individual dog won't find any one of those things too distracting.

Be creative. Think of new things to add to the list. When your dog can cope with them all, start making up combinations. Invite two or more friends around to help. Have them toss a ball back and forth while you practise stays or recalls. Have one of them whistle a tune while the other waves her arms around. The sky is the limit so long as we **always set our dogs up for success**.

When we have trained with distractions inside the house, we're ready to find a quiet spot outside. No other dogs around, no kids playing, no cars screaming past, and hopefully no cats or squirrels. We train

the behavior, then start adding the distractions from our list, always setting our dog up to succeed.

That is all there is to it - manufacture some controlled distractions, build them up, and always make them just easy enough that Sophie continually succeed so that we can reinforce the behavior.

Regards,

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