

Balanced training

striking a balance
by Mary Mazzeri

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By employing a combination of direct and indirect approaches, owners can train their dogs more quickly and effectively.

“Fuzzy, come!” yelled Agnes as her little Cairn Terrier took off at full speed after an unexpected meeting with a cat on the front lawn. Fuzzy had braced his feet, thrashed his head and backed right out of the collar he was wearing, leaving Agnes holding a lead with an empty collar attached. The retreating cat was bolting for the road. Suddenly Agnes realized that Fuzzy’s path was going to intersect with a fast-approaching Chevy Blazer, and her commands became more urgent, more desperate.

“Fuzzy, cookie, come get a cookie! Fuzzy, COME!” But Fuzzy didn’t want a cookie just then; Fuzzy wanted a cat. The brakes screeched sickeningly and slid miraculously to a halt within 6 inches of the little brindle terrier. Momentarily distracted, Fuzzy flinched at this huge metal monster that had come and shrieked at him. He barked back at the menacing car, having forgotten his previous pursuit.

Agnes caught up with Fuzzy and scooped him up before he could get himself into any more trouble. He hung abject and limp in her arms, temporarily submissive from being caught unaware. The driver, a little shaken herself, put her hand over her mouth and stuck her head out the window. Taking her trembling hand away, she asked apprehensively, “Is it alright?”

“He’s okay,” Agnes replied, visibly shaken. She was upset, relieved and frustrated all at the same time. As the woman drove slowly away, Agnes balanced Fuzzy in one arm while tightening up the collar and putting it back on his neck. Fuzzy had graduated second in his obedience class. He would do anything for a treat, but when it came to situations like this, his obedience training seemed to go in one ear and out the other.

Agnes thought about her neighbor Sally, whose Doberman Pinscher, Reva, was so well trained that she consistently responded to commands, even when she was not wearing a collar and lead. Reva would have come immediately when called. Agnes remembered that Reva had been trained on a prong collar. She’d always thought that the collar looked so well, mean. And yet Reva was a happy dog and complied to Sally’s wishes with delight and speed. Agnes decided to have a talk with Sally to find out more about the type of training that Reva had gone through. The Dobe’s consistent reliability was hard to argue with, especially after the close call she’d just had with Fuzzy.

The Objectives of the Approaches

To be sure, there are many different dog-training approaches. The objective of all methods is to help a dog understand which behaviors are wanted and which are unwanted. I will guide you through two methods or approaches. I will call one “direct” and the other “indirect.” Indirect learning is maintained through external management and motivation and it is primarily positively induced. For example, when training a dog to sit, a food lure is placed just above its nose and moved back toward the ears. The dog eventually gets tired of holding its head up and sits, because it is more comfortable to do so. This is when it receives the food. With patience, repetition and persistence, the dog eventually associates the word sit with the desired position. The frequency with which the dog is given the food reward is gradually reduced, but the reward must still be given intermittently to maintain the behavior if no direct training is done. Direct training is compulsive. For example, when training the dog to sit, the handler uses hands, collar and lead to show the dog how to find the sit position. The dog is physically manipulated into the position and praised verbally. With patience, repetition and persistence, this dog, too, eventually associates the word sit with the desired position. In this learning phase, the cues are eventually reduced and, once the dog understands the sit command, the dog is given a choice to sit and receive praise and attention, or to not sit and receive an aversive consequence. An aversive consequence is a correction, such as a snap on the collar, that causes the dog to sit. The correction should be just unpleasant enough for the dog to want to avoid it. Once the dog is sitting, it is immediately praised. The dog works to avoid correction and receive praise. Understanding and obedience are two different things. A dog trained with both indirect and direct methods self-regulates its training internally. Once taught and understood, the dog internalizes its responses to behaviors it has learned. Doing the requested behaviors brings the dog a sense of completion and rest.

I will illustrate self-regulation with another common training problem and try to look at it from the dog’s point of view. The dog’s jumping up on people is often a problem for owners. Putting muddy paw prints on good clothing or knocking a small child or frail senior off their feet is unacceptable behavior. There are many ways to teach a puppy or dog not to jump on people without ruining the relationship between dog and handler. There are also ways to help the dog understand, self-regulate and learn an acceptable, alternate way to greet people. With the indirect approach, the problem is merely managed by anticipating the jumping and substituting a desirable behavior, such as requesting that the dog sit instead. There is no direct communication to the dog that helps it understand that the jumping is undesirable. I don’t have any problem with teaching a dog to sit instead of jumping. In fact, it is good for a dog to know what you’d like it to do instead of jumping, but it seems that a lot of dogs just don’t understand not jumping.

Dick Russell, a notable dog-training professional from Louisiana, says that “the dog does not internalize the idea.” It does not realize that the sitting behavior should always be substituted for the jumping behavior. It also does not realize that it can choose to jump or not jump. The dog will continue to attempt to jump because it is a dog, and that is what dogs do. And the guest who does not know the household’s “tell the dog to sit” rule is very likely to be jumped on. The indirect solution does not help the dog understand that jumping is not wanted.

With a direct approach, there is a cause-and-effect relationship between the jumping behavior and its immediate consequence. This realization is established directly through a correction. In this case, a correction is an immediate, unpleasant consequence resulting from its behavior. This could be an unseen step on a dragging lead that inhibits the jump, a reflexive knee bump to the chest, walking quickly into the dog as it jumps, or a startling snap on the lead from behind the dog by an owner at the ready.

This is done with no yelling or scolding. No negative emotion or animosity is directed at the dog. Emotionally detached corrections are key to success. The dog will associate corrections with the jumping because that is what happens every time it jumps. In a short time, practicing in different locations with different people, the dog quickly realizes a direct cause-and-effect relationship between jumping and the startling consequence. Dogs do not like surprises, so they learn to avoid jumping to avoid the consequence.

I usually talk pleasantly to a jumping dog while my knee (or shin, or even ankle with a smaller dog) reflexively bumps into the dog’s chest, just enough to startle and make the jumping unrewarding. When the dog lands and seems unsure of what to do, the sit command can be given. The dog is given calm, soothing attention - both praise and petting - as long as it does not jump. This is, after all, what the dog wanted in the first place.

As a parallel illustration, when you go to the doctor for a checkup and he taps your knee with that little rubber reflex hammer, your leg goes flying. Nothing personal, just a reaction to a reflex center. Think of the dog as the reflex hammer. When a dog jumps on a person, a correction is an immediate surprise that startles the dog in a way that makes them want to stop jumping. The owner makes no eye contact with the dog until it lands. When the dog lands, the owner tells the dog to sit and then gives it positive attention, as long as it remains in the sitting position.

Making the Two Methods Work Together

Let's look at Licorice the Labrador Retriever. Licorice runs up to greet Dad at the end of the day. Dad says pleasantly, "Hi, Licorice. Sit." And Licorice, in his exuberance, jumps up and - oof - runs into a knee, which puts him back on the ground. Whereupon Dad continues without missing a beat, "What a good fellow, so glad to see you!" Once again Licorice leaps for joy. Dad's knee seems to be having the hiccups every time he jumps. Ooof again, and as Licorice lands, Dad gives the alternative sit command. Finally Licorice tries the suggestion and, lo and behold, Dad actually reaches down calmly to pet him.

"So, that's how I get him to pet me," thinks Licorice. He starts to wind up again and the petting stops. Licorice thinks, "Oh, no, don't stop the petting!" He starts to jump but then checks himself - he has internalized inhibition because he is thinking about the consequences. He thoughtfully sits back down, and immediately Dad reaches down once again and begins to praise and pet him. Licorice quivers with delight; his choice to exhibit self-control has earned him the affection he craved. It has been my experience that the learning curve is cut way down when the two approaches are combined.

The correction gives dogs a more direct frame of reference as to why it is better not to jump. This is more immediately effective than merely redirecting the dog's behavior. Dogs are more quickly able to figure out an appropriate response to the combination of techniques than when either is used alone and, if done appropriately, the training sticks with a dog much longer than when done with either technique separately. This is the beauty of striking a balance. All dog owners want to be kind to their dogs. When they come to obedience classes for training, they generally also want their dogs trained to have reliable, good behavior - to come when they are called and stay when they are told, to be good with people - and they want to do it as time- and cost-effectively as possible. A trained dog is one that has learned to take responsibility for learned behaviors. Its behavior becomes self-regulated because the dog has learned the different consequences its choices result in.

Training with food has become popular, although it is certainly not a new concept. It is an indirect, external motivation. Besides dogs, circus and aquarium animals have been trained with food for years. Whether a trainer is dealing with an orca or lions and tigers, they are dealing with different social instincts in a controlled environment. This is not the same situation that most fanciers face in trying to deal with a dog at home where family and visitors come and go. Most dogs respond well to food-based training, but often, especially as puppies get older, other needs and interests override their desire for food.

For example, a dog generally comes running from the yard when called because it usually gets a treat for doing so. If a dog bolts out the front door, it may prefer to chase a passing squirrel or cat into the road at that given moment, like our friend Fuzzy. This is because, at that moment, its chase instinct, or prey drive, may override its desire for food. The same dog, if "distraction-proofed" - which involves teaching the dog how to respond when distracted by checking it at the end of a long line when it runs after distractions - will be far more likely to think about the consequences of its behavior and respond to a command. In fact, it will probably have been taught not to pass through the door without permission.

For some owners, the thought of causing the dog any discomfort makes it difficult for them to correct their dogs. "All positive, no correction" methods may seem like more pleasant alternatives than one that uses a combination of positive and negative techniques. I can offer for consideration the thought that, although it is unpleasant for a dog to be checked on a long line, it is a controlled consequence and is far more preferable to having an untrained or "food-trained only" dog get hit by a truck.

A balanced approach puts some responsibility for making choices on the shoulders of the dog. This is a very attainable objective. You will see such decision-making when you see a well-trained Seeing Eye dog or service assistance dog. These dogs see their jobs as self-rewarding. Performing a command gives them a great deal of satisfaction. They know that they will both avoid discipline and earn rewards.

There are some activities that are innately rewarding to a dog, such as hunting, herding or tracking. But for the coercive things we require of them - sit, down, stay, don't jump, don't pee in the house - we can either get mad at them, hand out treats and hope, or give them compelling reasons and rewards - direct and indirect training - to do or avoid behaviors. And, hopefully, Fuzzy will live another day to chase a cat ... until, of course, Agnes calls him to return to her.

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