

The Importance of Motivation and Initiative

Home-spun wisdom about dog training abounds. If your dog poops in the house, rub his nose in it! That will teach him. If your dog will not come when called, go get him and smack the daylight out of him. And, of course, if this good advice does not work, take the dog out back and shoot him. You can always get another dog. There are a lot of problems with this mindset, not the least of which is what it says about the “human being” giving the advice.

Using these harsh methods WILL motivate your dog. It will motivate her to obey out of fear. It might even motivate her to strike back violently in order to protect herself one day. Initiative also suffers under aversive training. Have you ever been afraid to try something new because you were afraid to fail? A dog under harsh training will be afraid to use its natural good sense for fear of being hurt for failing.

The beauty of positive reinforcement is that it encourages your dog to use her innate intelligence and independent initiative. Your dog will not be afraid to fail while trying to please you. This ability to think for herself comes in handy when training complex commands such as the stay-sit or in taking commands from a trainer that is out of sight. Both of these commands demand that the dog be able to think through what is expected of her in order to comply in a nontraditional manner. Out there in the real world, the ability to manage complex decisions can have life or death consequences. A dog without this ability will mindlessly obey the come command even if it puts her in danger (for example, coming across a road even though there is traffic coming).

It is your job to encourage this capacity for independent thought. If you catch your dog doing the right thing without your input, reward her. For instance, if your dog sits politely while you walk through the door and then follows you in, give her a “good girl” and a treat. You have just rewarded her for good independent thought. As Martha Stewart would say, “That’s a good thing!” It is also your job to find what motivates your dog and build a willingness to please within her. You cannot force a dog to want to please you. You can, however, nurture that natural willingness into a full-blown partnership. Always reward her (within two seconds or so) for the “right” behaviors and do not confuse her by rewarding for the “wrong” behaviors.

While building that motivated, independent thinker, don’t be afraid to let her work through things on her own. Learning takes place best when your dog is given the chance to make the decision to obey on her own. Too many dog owners are impatient for perfection in their dogs. If you have asked her to stay, give her the opportunity to succeed or fail without constant, nervous reiteration of the command. Give her the command once and expect her to obey it. If she fails, you have been given a training opportunity. Spend a minute to remind her what the stay command means. Constant repetition just teaches your dog to ignore the first few commands.

The most important benefit of positive reinforcement is that it builds happy, confident companion dogs. This combined with your dog’s natural intelligence is a winning formula.

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