



# BEYOND THE DOG

St. Louis

## Does Behavior Modification Work with Dogs?



Behavior modification has been used to study organisms from pigeons and rats to humans. Additionally, understanding how consequences impact behavior has led to successful treatments for adults, children, companion animals, and even captive animals. Manipulating the environment to produce desired behavioral effects is an effective way to create behavior change in dogs. Teaching a dog that food or

attention comes (reinforcers) after compliance or that a timeout (negative punishment) occurs for jumping are all effective ways to train dogs. Additionally, behavior analysts prioritize positive reinforcement strategies over punishment strategies which helps build rapport between owners and their pets and is a more ethical means of treatment.

So, in short, YES, behavior modification does work with dogs. In fact, there are multiple types of behavior modification that can be done with dogs to change their behavior. We will cover each of them briefly:

Punishment. I want to get this one out of the way because historically it has been the most popular way to change behavior in the domesticated dog. For example, electric shock (shock collars) have been used to reduce problem behavior in dogs (Green & Woodruff, 1990). Additionally, citronella collars (Moffat et al., 2003) or even physical punishment like kneeling a dog in the chest when it jumps (Koehler, 1996) have all been used and recommended by dog trainers. Now, just because you can, does not mean you should. In fact, ethical guidelines formally guide treatment and state explicitly that reinforcement-based procedures should be used prior to ANY punishment (APDT, 2017). Additionally, the type of punishment matters. Negative punishment or removing something pleasant for a brief period of time (e.g., a timeout) is preferred over a positive punisher, which introduces an aversive stimulus (e.g., a loud “no”). Even in the positive punishment spectrum, there are types of punishers that are more preferred than others and reputable dog trainers will NOT use certain punishment procedures like a shock collar - therefore we recommend NOT using punishment procedures without guidance from a behavior consultant. There is so much room for error with punishment procedures AND there are SO many better options that I want to steer clear of this one!

Reinforcement. This one seems to make a lot of sense to dog owners. You ask your dog to sit, he sits, and then you provide a treat. His rate of sitting goes up! Seems simple enough, right? But what about decreasing behavior we don't want to see? A procedure called differential reinforcement is a way that behaviorists can modify a dog's environment by discontinuing reinforcement for problem behavior and reinforcing something different. For example, if your dog jumps for attention, you can instead give him attention for doing something different like sitting, but no longer provide attention for jumping (I know, easier said than done!). This way, if your dog wants attention, he will have to sit for it (or anything that isn't jumping). Formally, differential reinforcement means to put the problematic behavior on extinction while simultaneously reinforcing another, more appropriate, behavior. We use this procedure to reduce a lot of common problem behaviors like jumping, play mouthing, or even barking for attention (Burch & Bailey, 1999).

Reinforcement strategies have been compared to punishment strategies with great success - dogs do well and owners prefer these methods (Protopopova et al., 2016).

Classical conditioning. Yet another way we can modify a dog's behavior is through a process called pairing. Pairing is the process that involves creating a positive association between something that might be aversive or scary with highly valued goodies like peanut butter. By creating a situation where good things always happen when that scary thing is around, we can reduce problem behavior. There is no need to engage in barking or growling if that stimulus means food is coming right? Your trainer can then fade out the food over time so you don't always have to have food on you when you go places with your dog.

Antecedent Interventions. Sometimes behavior modification can happen seemingly more "indirectly". Rowdy puppies might just need more structured exercise throughout the day. Even

having dogs work for their meals can be a way to modify their environment in ways that makes their lives more enriching. Ways to provide more reinforcing activities in dogs' daily lives is a great way to reduce problematic behavior.

The "Least Intrusive, Minimally Aversive" strategies are used to help modify behavior in the most humane ways (APDT, 2017). We look at potential medical issues first to rule those out prior to any behavior modification procedures. Then we look at antecedent factors like changing the broad environment for the dog. At that point we introduce specific positive reinforcement strategies. If we need to, at this point we would introduce negative punishment or negative reinforcement procedures. Lastly, and only if necessary, we employ the use of positive punishment strategies.

There are numerous ways to change dog behavior using behavior techniques, some more preferred and ethical than others. If in doubt, there are animal behaviorists trained in the science of behavior to help!

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## Citations

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