

Some Thoughts On “Balanced Training” and “All Positive” Training

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With the balanced approach you have options

It is a widely accepted truth of modern dog training that dogs positively motivated and inspired in the training process train happier and learn better. Given this truth, there is nothing in “all positive” training or “positive reinforcement-only” which is not also offered in balanced training. The key difference is that the balanced approach includes a full range of options as opposed to the unilateral nature of “all positive” training, which often rejects many time-tested and effective training methods and tools.

What is actually “natural” and “humane”?

Children are not raised with a diet of constant rewards devoid of appropriate corrections, nor are animals. Pups are corrected by their mother, and dogs correct each other constantly throughout their lives. So it isn't consistent with nature or practical reality for trainers to attempt to maintain such an artificial standard, nor helpful to the dog given the challenges of real life which it will face. The human-dog relationship is a more than 10,000-year-old partnership hard-wired in the dog's genetic makeup. It is our obligation as leaders (trainers and owners on whom dogs as animals depend) to uphold the leadership structure and to communicate it clearly, fairly and lovingly to the dog. Only within this structure of leadership -- of motivation, reward and responsible correction -- do respect and affection develop meaning to the dog.

The Importance of “Yes” and “No”

The Balanced Training approach, which incorporates motivation, praise (and corrections when necessary and only after a dog has learned a skill), doesn't believe a dog can be fully trained without an understanding of the command “No” and the logic and necessity behind it. Dogs can and do naturally learn and understand this logic, and their lives with their owners and families are happier because of it. Ignoring or not addressing a dog's unwanted behavior (or assuming it will fade away on its own) and only rewarding its desired behavior (without the necessary element of contrast) is not a training method supported by the reality of nature or human society and can be a constant stress on the dog, which seeks its alleviation through various maladaptive behaviors.

Respect for the dog

“Purely positive” training (that which excludes all reasonable aversive discipline) denies the dog the self-respect and dignity involved in accepting the consequences of its actions and demonstrating it can learn from them. It is demeaning, as it fails to appreciate the dog's capacity to deal with life beyond a strict formula of stimulus-reward, treating it like a psychologically-fragile exception to nature. Dogs are more than this, and our relationships with them are deeper; when honesty and accountability are integrated into our training and relationships, we all benefit.

Pressure means growth

A dog needs to be pushed at times – to feel pressure and stress -- in order to learn. This is how the natural world works. When the dog emerges at the other side, and its success is recognized and

rewarded and it experiences the self-worth of choice and consequence and reward, it is stronger and more confident. Trainers always need to be careful not to overload a dog with stress – this is the challenge and skill of evaluating a dog, understanding its personality and developing a training plan which apportions the right amount of challenge at the right moments. But the compulsive avoidance of all stress (impossible, in any event) deprives the dog of this essential growth experience and, in my opinion, will not produce a confident dog or a dog able to achieve its fullest individual potential.

Corrections as communication

Corrections are NOT punishments but an essential form of communication. The handler/owner clarifies and reinforces what he expects, the dog is praised for responding, and their bond strengthens in the process. We always correct TOWARD the right behavior, not for the sake or satisfaction of punishment or, as trainer Chad Mackin puts it, “to extract a price.” Corrections serve the greater relationship; this is how they should be understood and practiced.

The fallacy of “force-free” or “pressure-free” training

Introducing food as a reward into training also introduces pressure. Studies have shown that for certain high-drive dogs, withholding food (negative punishment) can produce greater levels of stress than collar corrections (positive punishment). The point is, all training and education require pressure of some kind; we need to find the right form, the right degree – the particular formula -- for each dog.

In my experience, positive-only training is not adequate to the needs and nature of dogs. It falls short in a number of ways and with many dogs. As a result, very trainable dogs which simply need but are denied honest and fair communication from their handlers are given up as hopeless causes. In the fanatical interest to spare dogs “aversives” (often simple leash corrections and other forms of basic communication), potentially trainable and loving pets are lost to all of us and euthanized.