

TIPS FOR TRAINING DOGS AND PEOPLE

Back in the 80s, I had a springer spaniel dog named Emily. I had no idea how to train a dog so I will take all the blame for Emily's bad behavior. She was a nervous girl and hated to ride in the car. One of her unique skills was she loved to swim in the Galveston surf and body surf. She would dive into the Gulf, swim out, then catch the waves, just like a surfer. There would be a wave and then a little dog head would appear from under the wave. People on the seawall would stop and watch. However, because of her nervous nature, she would skitz out on any occasion. By "skitz out" I mean jumping, spinning, and getting hyper in every possible direction. This went on for some time so one day I decided I would take her to the Vet to see if there was doggie Prozac. (Prozac was big in the 1980s). Of course, Emily was no dummy. When we got to the Vet, she was a model dog. No jumping, no spinning, nothing but a perfectly calm dog. The Vet looked at me and said, not so kindly, "Ma'am I think you are the one that needs the Prozac!"



I left the Vet's office with my tail between my legs. Emily's tail was wagging. As soon as we got in the parking lot, Emily returned to her hyper jumping and spinning ways. OK Emily I love you but I don't need Prozac.



Dogs that are trained are more fun and can go more places. Susan Garrett is an expert on training dogs and has a wonderful website on training your dog. <http://susangarrettdogagility.com/>

Susan Garrett was recently interviewed on Tim Ferris's podcast. Here is the link to the podcast <http://fourhourworkweek.com/2016/11/14/susan-garrett/>. There are several you tube videos on her training methods. In a nutshell, she uses a value choice basis training vs. a punishment based. The punishment method (which I am very opposed to) is the rolled up newspaper route. The choice method is giving the dog a chance to make a choice, then giving them the reward (the cookie).



Susan says to figure out your dog's favorite treat and put it in your hand, then close your fist. Mr. Dog doesn't get the cookie until he does the required behavior. Even, if the required behavior is performed, Mr. Dog has to not rush to get the treat. If he does, you close your fist again. Mr. Dog figures out that he can make a choice—a good choice—and a treat will result. If not, no treat.

Also on the website is what to do in the first 24 hours when you bring your puppy home. She says this is critical to set the stage. If it is anything goes, Mr. Dog thinks he is at Disneyland. So it is much better to set the stage in the beginning with the proper cues in place.

Susan says that you have to be very intentional about giving the reward, the cookie. Mr. Dog learns the choice is connected to the cookie. Some dogs like to eat and will settle for plain ole Kibble. But some are more discriminating. As Tim Ferris says, "In a crowded bar, you have to tip with \$20s." Translation — some dogs will require pricey treats for their reward.

Susan has several games she plays with her dogs that are critical for training purposes. She is big on crates. Susan says that dogs are den animals and they like to have a safe spot. It is their spot to chill, a place of safety. She uses a crate to train her dogs not to jump and rush. She says that if they rush to get out she just closes the crate door. Mr. Dog associates her hand moving to the crate door as a message to sit, not rush. She compares it to the way humans relate to getting a speeding ticket. Getting a speeding ticket doesn't stop us from speeding, at least not for me. So punishment doesn't work. However, when we see a trooper on the side of the road, we automatically slow down, even if not speeding. The same goes even if it is just a car on the side of the road. We will automatically slow down until we know it isn't a trooper.



Just like the trooper on the side of the road, Mr. Dog associates the action – closing the crate door — with no rushing and ultimately the cookie reward.

Susan warns that you can't show Mr. Dog the cookie before requesting the desired behavior. Good behavior, then cookie. She also suggests that you don't mindlessly say Mr. Dog's name over and over or let your kids constantly say it. If this occurs, Mr. Dog starts to tune out his name.

Another good point she mentions concerns letting the puppy out in the middle of the night to do his business. You never want to play with the puppy because you will be encouraging him to think it is ok to go out at 2am to play.



All of this makes so much sense. It also makes sense with people. Susan said she learned this concept from her mother who used it on her nine kids. The kids would be upstairs watching TV. Their mother would call and say come down for dinner. Her mom did not yell. They had a choice about coming down do dinner. They didn't have to. But if they didn't, her mother would go in the basement and pull the switch on the circuit for the TV. Sounds like punishment to me but she took that concept and ran with it.



Does this concept work on people? An interesting book is “How to Train Your Spouse Like an Animal” by Amy Sutherland. <https://bookpage.com/interviews/8443-amy-sutherland#.WDXLd-urtjs> (And to my partner, Tom, no I am not using this with you). Sutherland was researching a book about exotic animal trainers and discovered that the techniques used to teach baboons to skateboard proved to be the perfect way to train her spouse. She says, “The central lesson I learned from exotic animal trainers is that I should reward behavior I like and ignore behavior I don’t. After all, you don’t get a sea lion to balance a ball on the end of its nose by nagging. The same goes for the American husband.” She writes that instead of nagging her husband for, say, leaving dirty gym clothes lying around, she feigned ignorance. But when he cleaned it up, she showered him in thanks. Soon the praise had trained away many of his bad habits.” (Note from Carla-- who can ignore stinky gym clothes?)



Another tip from the exotic animal trainer is, according to Sutherland, a concept called approximations. “You can’t expect a baboon to learn to flip on command in one session. You first reward a hop, then a bigger hop, then an even bigger hop.” Instead of asking someone to do a complex task, you need to reward them for each small step, or approximation, that leads to the full task.

A second technique is called Incompatible Behavior. This is training someone out of a bad habit by sidestepping it completely. Rather than teaching the bird to stop landing on the trainer’s head, he taught the bird to land on nearby mats.

The Least Reinforcing Syndrome is to not respond to a negative behavior at all, since any reaction may fuel the bad habit. A dolphin trainer avoids a misbehaving dolphin and goes on with their work, like you should do when your boss or co-worker has an outburst of constant complaints.

All good food for thought.