

PROS & CONS OF DIFFERENT TRAINING METHODS

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- First, Do No Harm -

CORRECTION-PUNISHMENT (CP)

Methodology

The trainer uses physical placement (moulding) with verbal praise and/or a food reward and corrections for non-compliance or incorrect behaviour, usually collar corrections followed by verbal praise and/or treats when the dog complies. Example: if the dog fails to sit, breaks a stay or moves out of heel position, he is corrected, and then praised for being in the correct position. The aim of CP training relies on creating a dichotomy between behaviours that earn a correction and those that earn praise; the dog is taught to avoid the former and offer the latter.

Pros

- With dogs of a specific temperament (strong enough to withstand the pressure/anxiety triggered by frequent corrections) and in the hands of a skilled trainer with good timing, CP training successfully follows the principles of Operant Conditioning, i.e. the natural law of how organisms learn.
- If used skilfully and with correct timing, CP training quickly suppresses undesirable behaviour in the presence of the trainer and/or the leash, and it may also sometimes carry over to situations where the trainer/leash is not present.

Cons

- CP training punishes behaviour the dog may not know how to avoid, making it unfair and potentially stressful or depressing, especially for dogs with softer temperaments.
- Mistakes in CP training, such as incorrect timing, can have a detrimental effect on both the dog's psyche and the handler-dog relationship. Unless used with skill, the dog may associate the trainer with the corrections.
- Even when employed by a skilled trainer, it is not always certain that what the trainer intends to punish is the same as what the dog perceives as being punished.
- CP training requires a high degree of expertise in reading the dog. Applying a 'proper' correction is a physical skill that requires a level of coordination and timing that is often beyond the abilities of the average dog owner. Hence, CP training does not transfer well from a skilled trainer and instructor to an unskilled owner-handler. Likewise, it does not transfer easily from on-leash to off-leash work.
- CP training does not result in the dog learning self-control, as the behaviour of the dog is dependent on the presence of the trainer.

LURE-REWARD (LR)



Methodology

Holding food, the trainer lures the dog into position and rewards with the treat (or toy). The reward is immediate to the behaviour. The dog focuses on and follows the lure.

Pros

- A food motivated dog responds quickly to food lures and a toy-motivated dog will respond equally to the lure of a favourite toy. The lure quickly induces the desired response, and simply following the lure earns the reward.
- The dog's quick response is highly reinforcing for the LR trainer, as it offers fast, short-term results for many simple behaviours, like sit, down, come, heel, etc.
- The luring motion easily transfers to become a hand signal cue.
- Simple behaviours are easily lured, making LR suitable for unskilled trainers starting off with an untrained dog.

Cons

- In order to work, the dog must be interested in the lure.
- If the dog that is too focused on the lure, it may become impossible to train with it in sight, as the presence of the lure overshadows the learning.
- The dog's response is dependent on the lure being present and the handler luring with it. This makes the lure an enticement, a bribe, rather than a reward and if the lure is not presented, there will be no response from the dog.
- LR is ill-suited for training complex behaviours.
- Because LR is so reinforcing for the trainer (a pro), most LR trainers have difficulty fading the lure (a con).
- When faced with non-compliance when trying to fade the lure, many LR trainers quickly fall back to luring with a treat again, which – according to the laws of learning – will therefore reinforce the dog's non-compliance; the dog will learn that not responding will make the handler produce the lure.
- The lure motion must be faded: gradually reduced, and then eliminated. This can be time-consuming and prolongs each behaviour's learning phase.
- In some dogs, it can be doubtful whether any real learning is taking place, other than "follow the lure", as the dog's focus is on the lure, not on the behaviour. This makes the dog's gaining an understanding of the behaviour slower than when he is able to focus on his behaviour.

TRAINING-WITH-A-CLICKER (TWAC)



Methodology

TWAC is not actually a recognised method of training, but it commonly occurs “by accident” when trainers have a limited understanding of Clicker Training (CT). It is often seen to be a mixture of LR and CT, sometimes also CP.

The clicker is used to announce the arrival of the reward, but it often is used to mark only complete behaviours, such as lying down, being in heel position, etc, and the treat delivery is dependent on the dog remaining in position.

The clicker may also be used as a “keep-going” signal, and may not always be followed by a reward. The trainer still controls the dog’s behaviour with luring, placement (moulding) or even with corrections.

The trainer relies on prompts (luring, guiding) and actively leads the dog, while the dog follows the trainer’s lead, with the short-term goal of speedily learning a behaviour.

The clicker may even be used to mark compliance following the use of positive punishment or negative reinforcement.

The clicker is rarely used for shaping a behaviour.

Pros & Cons

Depending on the individual trainer, the pros and cons of TWAC are usually the same, or nearly the same, as those listed for LR, and if CP is used, those listed for that method, too.

CLICKER TRAINING (CT)



Methodology

The trainer waits for the dog to either offer a complete (simple) behaviour ('capturing') or some basic approximation of a behaviour that will then be "shaped" towards closer and closer approximations of a (more complex) behaviour until the finished behaviour is achieved ('shaping').

The basic principles in the application of the clicker are:

- a) The clicker is used purely as an event marker.
- b) The click must always be followed by a reward (treat, toy, 'life reward').
- c) Click ends the behaviour (whatever the dog does between click and treat is irrelevant, or nearly irrelevant).
- d) The reward must be of high enough value that it "concentrates the dog's mind" and makes him voluntarily choose to do the behaviour rather than give in to any ongoing distraction.

Pros

- CT relies heavily on the scientific data behind the Laws of Learning (a.k.a. Thorndike's Law of Effect), so when used according to its basic principles and with reasonably good timing, it is unlikely to fail.

- CT allows for, or actually requires, relatively fast weaning of the clicker and treats.

- CT involves the dog and gives him time to think out for himself what the trainer wants, instead of letting the dog passively following a lure and/or directions.

- In the case of dogs that lack in self-confidence, the active involvement on the part of the dog in the training process helps him to gain confidence.

- A common 'side-effect' of CT is that the dog learns self-control, and this can also be taught specifically with CT.

- Heavy reliance on positive reinforcement and negative punishment makes this method safe in the hands of inexperienced handlers, as it is forgiving of mistakes.

Cons

- CT requires patience and silence on the part of the trainer.

- CT requires that the trainer/handler acquires an understanding of the basic principles of the training method, and learns the basic mechanical skills of clicking on time, to never show a treat before clicking, to never move the treat hand before clicking, etc.

WHICH METHOD SHOULD I USE TO TRAIN MY DOG?



- First, Do No Harm -

Just like we cannot disregard or defy the Laws of Gravity, neither will we ever be able to disregard the Laws of Learning. Any training method that does not employ the Laws of Learning is unlikely to be truly successful.

Personally, since I started training my first dog in 1970, I have employed each one of the four methods discussed in this paper. It has been my experience that:

- A training technique must ‘work’ – there has to be learning taking place on the part of the dog.
- A training technique must be fair to the dog and do no harm – physical or mental – to the dog; if it doesn’t, it will cause delay of learning at best, shut-down and behaviour problems at worst. Neither should the training harm the relationship between the dog and the owner/handler.
- The average dog owner, including children, must be able to use it. Consequently, the training method must not rely on any exceptional talent, innate dog-handling skills, or on the trainer’s ability to physically or mentally dominate the dog.
- The average owner must be willing to perform the training technique, i.e. it must not require owners to do something to their dogs that they find objectionable or too difficult.

Clicker Training is to me undoubtedly the most scientifically correct method, and thus also the most effective method. It is also fun. I thoroughly enjoy training my own dogs with this method, and I love teaching it to my students and see them and their dogs delight in it, too. However, in my classes and consultation, we will also sometimes use Lure-Reward Training. When we do, we will make sure to quickly fade the lure, so that we do not “get stuck” with it!

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