

Why We Use Relationship-Based Training

By Sherry Woodard

The trainers at Best Friends have found that dog training built on a positive relationship is the most kind – and also the most effective – method of training. When you have a positive relationship with the dog, you have the animal’s trust, and he/she wants to spend time with you and work with you. Training based on punishment or dominance negates any sort of positive relationship you might develop with the animal.



By reinforcing behaviors that you like and want to continue seeing, you set the dog up for success. Positive relationship-based training is effective for teaching new behaviors or changing current behavior for any physically and mentally healthy animal. Regardless of an animal’s age and past experiences, positive training methods give an animal the best chance for success at living happily and comfortably in our hectic human world.

What is relationship-based training? It is a method of training that uses the positive relationship between the trainer and the dog to achieve results that benefit both the dog and the trainer, while at the same time enhancing and strengthening their relationship. Here are some of the basic principles:

- The animal’s immediate needs come first. Is the animal injured, ill, fearful, frustrated, hungry, thirsty, needing to eliminate? Put off training until the animal’s needs have been met and he/she can concentrate on the training exercise.
- Learn to interpret animals’ body language. There are telltale signs that let you know how the animal is feeling – whether it’s joy, anger, fear, frustration or some other emotion. Understanding body language improves communication between people and animals, and helps keep both animals and people safe.
- Find out what motivates the animal (affection, treats) and use it to your advantage.
- Use positive reinforcement to encourage behavior you like. You can elicit and reinforce desired behavior through the techniques of capturing, luring and prompting. “Capturing” behavior means using praise and other rewards to encourage recurrence of a behavior that occurred spontaneously. “Luring” involves getting the dog to focus on a treat or other desirable object and using it like a magnet to move the dog’s head or entire body in a desired direction to produce a behavior or posture we want to reinforce. “Prompting” is a technique that uses a sign or signal to encourage a behavior we want to reinforce. Examples of prompts are holding your hand in front of a dog’s face when you want to encourage a “stay” or patting the seat of the car when you want the dog to jump in.
- Punishment is not necessary for eliminating undesirable behaviors. Instead, ignore

the behavior and/or teach incompatible behaviors. For example, teach the dog to sit for a greeting rather than jumping up – it’s difficult for him to do both. To reinforce the desired behavior, reward with praise or treats. In contrast to punishment-based training, this approach supports the positive relationship between you and the dog.

- Prevent the animal’s ability to continue practicing unwanted behaviors by controlling the environment and controlling the dog’s exposure. For example, distract the dog or limit access to a window, door or fence line if there are inappropriate behaviors happening there.
- Supervise the animal carefully to set her up for success. You can avoid or prevent unwanted behaviors by simply being aware of what your dog is doing. For example, if a new dog or puppy is not house-trained, don’t allow her the full run of the house until she has been house-trained. Giving a dog too much freedom can set her up for failure.
- Practice, practice, practice! Don’t wait for the occasional chance to work on modifying the animal’s behavior. Instead, create behavior modification opportunities so you can help the dog become more comfortable.
- Use distraction to take the dog’s attention off an anxiety-provoking situation. For example, if your dog is afraid of children and you see a child walking toward your dog, you can distract the dog with praise or treats before the child approaches and as the child is passing. If you use this technique routinely, meeting children will become less and less stressful for the dog. In some cases, it may even become enjoyable.

Positive trainers also have realistic expectations. When training animals, they use patience – they understand that animals are not born knowing how to fit into our human lives. Most adult dogs I meet have not been properly taught how to be part of a loving human family. Even if they have been in a loving home, they may still lack the social skills to be comfortable around strangers and in new situations. Expecting an animal to know everything is unrealistic and punishing an animal for not knowing something is unfair. In relationship-based training, every animal is seen as an individual and the trainer works with the animal on that basis.

Over the years, as I’ve worked in this field, I’ve become aware of many other training techniques. I’ve worked with other trainers and veterinarians, attended conferences, read books, and watched training videos. My exposure to other training methods only confirms my belief in positive training techniques based on a mutually beneficial relationship with the individual animal.

Best Friends trainers have chosen not to use certain training methods, after seeing their detrimental effects on animals. These methods can cause confusion in the animal, lack of trust, breakdown of the relationship, physical injury, fear and so-called “unpredictable” behavior. Examples include:

- Dominance and physical force:
 - Pushing a dog into a sit or down position
 - Alpha rolls
 - Physical punishment (hitting, kicking, slapping, hanging, finger jabs)
- Leash corrections

- Harsh tones, verbal reprimands
- Methods that rely on inflicting pain, such as pinch/prong collars and choke chains

Besides the negative effect on the animals, and the fact that these techniques don't work over the long-term, these methods have resulted in injury to people and death to dogs. How? People who use these techniques are injured when the dogs fight back by biting. I have talked with people in these situations who have euthanized their dogs after deciding they could no longer trust them.

I've trained many types of animals – not just dogs – and positive, relationship-based training works for all of them. The success rate for positive, relationship-based training greatly exceeds that of punishment- or dominance-based training. Many, many research studies – dating back to Pavlov's famous experiments with dogs – have confirmed that positive reinforcement techniques deliver the most effective and reliable training results.

Helpful Articles

Using punishment:

"I'll Teach You a Thing or Two! The Unwanted Teachings of Punishment"

www.behaviorlogic.com/id97.html

"Let Me Teach You a Thing or Two! The Unwanted Teachings of Negative Reinforcement"

www.behaviorlogic.com/id105.html

Concerns about aversive dog-training techniques

www.dogwelfarecampaign.org/press-statement.php

Position statements:

The American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior has several position statements that reflect the society's opinion on topics such as dominance and the use of punishment:

www.avsonline.org/avsonline (click on Position Statements)

The Certification Council for Professional Dog Trainers has a document called "Humane Hierarchy Position Statement"

www.ccpdt.org (click on Governing Documents under About Us)

Using shock collars:

Letter from Dr. Karen Overall

joelwalton.com/shockcollars.html

"The Problem with Shock"

www.dogsportmagazine.com/?p=436

"Vets on Behavior Proclaim, Never Use Shock Collar"

www.goodnewsforpets.com/articles.asp?ID=147

Studies:

“Dog Training Methods: Their Use, Effectiveness and Interaction with Behavior and Welfare”

www.antrozoo.org/senteret.no/artikler/art_training_methods.pdf

“You Can Cross Over, But You Can’t Cross Back”

www.thepryorfoundation.org/dufford.html

“If You’re Aggressive, Your Dog Will Be Too, Says Veterinary Study”

www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2009/02/090217141540.htm

“New Study: Popular Techniques Can Cause Harm”

abrionline.org/articles.php

Helpful Resources

If you want to know more about positive, relationship-based training, here are some resources that I recommend:

Before You Get Your Puppy by Dr. Ian Dunbar

After You Get Your Puppy by Dr. Ian Dunbar

Dunbar, a veterinarian and animal behaviorist, covers what he calls the “developmental deadlines” to meet before and after you get your puppy.

Don’t Shoot the Dog! The New Art of Teaching and Training by Karen Pryor

Pryor clearly explains the underlying principles of behavioral training and uses numerous examples to show how to achieve your training objectives through positive reinforcement. She also has a website on clicker training: www.clickertraining.com.

The Culture Clash by Jean Donaldson

Donaldson presents a revolutionary new way of understanding the relationship between humans and dogs.

Outwitting Dogs: Revolutionary Techniques for Dog Training That Work by Terry Ryan

Ryan draws on her 25 years of hands-on experience to help people understand dogs, train dogs, and solve dog behavior problems using kinder, gentler methods.

Dog-Friendly Dog Training by Andrea Arden

This is a great book for beginners.

Also, check out the many resources listed under “Behavior and Training” in the section of the Best Friends website called You and Your Pets:

www.bestfriends.org/theanimals/petcare/dogs.cfm

Sherry Woodard is the animal behavior and training consultant at Best Friends. She develops resources and provides consulting services nationally to help achieve Best Friends’ No More Homeless Pets mission.