

Using a Head Halter on a Dog, Why My Approach is so Different

Speaker Key

SG Susan Garrett

Transcript

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SG Hey everybody, welcome to Shaped by Dog. I am Susan Garrett, today I'm going to share with you how I get brilliant behaviour in my dogs. It starts when they are a puppy. And it doesn't matter if you don't have a puppy, it could start with your dog at the age they are at right now. There's a formula for successful training and it doesn't matter what you're training. It doesn't matter who you are. And it doesn't matter what method you're training. It's simply two parts. Number one, you want to build value, reinforcement value for the behaviour that you would like to see from your dog. And number two, you want to avoid the dog rehearsing undesirable behaviours.

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And I would say the number three rule is don't ever chain number two and number one. What does that mean? Let's say you would like your dogs to sit to greet people. And so, you put a lot of time and put a lot of effort into reinforcing your dog for first of all sitting, then sitting near people, then sitting in front of people who are saying hello to them. So, in the meantime, you want to eliminate any rehearsals of your dog randomly going up and jumping on people. Because every time they rehearse a behaviour, that is contrary to what you want, you're fighting against your training.

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And what I mean by the number three is, you want to avoid chaining the dog jumping up and then sitting and getting a reward. Because behaviour chains, the reward they get at the end of the chain rewards the dog for every step they took. So, when the dog jumps up, the reward for jumping up is they get to get off and sit and the reward for sitting is you give them a cookie. That's a behaviour chain. So that's it in a nutshell. You don't need me for any other podcast. If you follow that simple formula.

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Challenges, we have these little creatures, whether we have a brand-new puppy, or we have a brand-new rescue dog, and we need to get them exercise. But every time we step outside of our house, there's a katrillion opportunities for them to rehearse an undesired behaviour. Right. They could eat things in the grass, they could pick up stones, they could pick up things we don't want them to pick up. They could say, "Oh, there's Charlie. I love Charlie." and try to jump on Charlie as he walks by.

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They could see cars or bicycles, or skateboards and they could lunge towards them. They could see other dogs and they could start, "Oh, I love other dogs!" Now seeing other dogs often starts just as curiosity, but the more we hold them back and they strain against that, the more that curiosity turns to reactivity where they go, you know, react it to the dog and that reactivity could easily roll onto aggression. So, we've got these new dogs or new puppies and we want to create only rehearsals of success. The challenge is we have to get them outside to see the world. We need to socialize them. We need to let them experience new things in their environment. How do we do all that? Now you see, there's a lot of things we can do for safety and to help control access to reinforcement.



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We could have a fenced in backyard. If you have a fenced in backyard, you let your dog out in the backyard, you don't find them three rows over at the neighbors eating meat off the barbecue. So that controls the rehearsal of undesired behaviour. If you have a dog, there's a very high probability that you have a fenced in backyard, or that you take your dog out on a leash and collar when you exercise them in the backyard.

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So that's one way we help set the dog up for success. In the house you might use an exercise pen or crate the dog when you're going to leave them for long periods of time. Minimize the opportunities to rehearse undesired behaviour by controlling their behaviours and putting them in a smaller environment. If you take them out for a walk you probably put them on a leash. That's a tool that you use to minimize the risk of them getting injured, keep them safe and minimize the risk of them rehearsing undesired behaviour.

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Sure, we'd love to be able to walk our dogs off leash, but if you haven't done the number one step, put tons and tons of reinforcement into the behaviour we want, the chances are the dog's going to go, "Okay, you've given me a few cookies for walking at your side, but I see a squirrel. See ya." That's what's going to happen. Right? So, there's all these distractions and we use things like fences and ExPens and crates and leashes and collars to help keep our dogs safe while we're building a history of success.

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The other tool that I use is a Head Halter. Now, before you click away, let me share with you two things. Number one, I recognize there is a lot of controversy or as my British friends say controversy (with accent) over the use of a Head Halter. I'm going to talk about that. Number two, I want you to know that I use a Head Halter differently than pretty much any other trainer will tell you how to use one. Including the instructions that come in the box that you buy the Head Halter with. All right.

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So first of all, let's talk about why the haters. Now people will say, putting this thing on your dog's head, it's dangerous because they could run to the end of their leash and snap their little neck and turn it around. Now, the manufacturers of these Head Halters say that they don't have any history of that happening. Now, whether you believe the manufacturers or not, I believe when you put a dog on a leash, it is like you are driving a car and you have two responsibilities. Number one, to be present. Right? Until we get those self-driving cars, we actually have to be present, making sure that our gauges are where they should be.

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You can't take off without any gas. You can't drive your old car when it's overheating. You can't have your dog red lining. You have to be present for what your dog is doing. Are they picking up things? Are they staring down another dog? Be present, that's number one. Number two, you've got to mirror check often. I learned that in driver's ed, when I was 16 years old. Check your rear-view mirror, check your side mirrors, always know what's in your environment. So important when you're driving your dog. Right. "No, that, Oh, I see a block ahead. There's a nice, overly friendly Labrador Retriever that looks like he's eyeing up my little fluffy, something a pooh." Right.



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And my little something a pooh might be a little bit afraid of that. If you're mirror checking regularly and you know what's in front of you, what's beside you or behind you, then you are prepared for what might happen. So, you put your dog on a leash and it isn't a set it and forget it while you scroll through Facebook. It is being present because that is an opportunity for you to build a happy and loving relationship with your dog.

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So, the dangers of a Head Halter, when people say they lunge to the end of the leash, that's taken away by walking your dog like you're driving your auto. Right. Be present, mirror check often. The other thing is that they say it's painful for a dog to have that Head Halter on. Well, I addressed how I condition it in [episode 39](#) here in Shaped by Dog, you get used to it.

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I got to tell you I'm 59 years old. I don't entirely love wearing a bra every day, but you know, for the friendliness of those in my environment, I generally wear one. So, it's not like anybody conditioned it with good cookies. That would have been a great idea Mom. Think about it. Things like wearing a hockey helmet when I play hockey or those of you who rollerblade or downhill ski, maybe you don't want to wear the protective gear, but eventually you get used to it if it's been conditioned properly.

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And that's what [episode 39](#) on Shaped by Dog is about. I know with my little puppy, This! I'll very likely be using her Head Halter in a month or two. So, I've already started when she was eight weeks old, I started her shaping the acceptance and the joy of a Head Halter. And I'll have many hours of lessons in on using that Head Halter before I ever have to engage that Head Halter for reals in the life and times of walking that dog. All right. So, the dangers are there, if you are ignorant to the TEMP of your dog. Right. And we talked about TEMP on [episode 4](#) here on Shaped by Dog.

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So, if you're following along this podcast, then you are heading towards the kind of relationship that I want with my dogs. And so, you aren't going to be absentmindedly walking your dog down the road. There is a correct process that I use. There are three rules that you absolutely don't do. Number one, make sure that Head Halter is fitted properly because a Head Halter that's not fitted properly and that is the one thing you can follow the manufacturer's recommendations.

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And that is it's very tight up around the neck. It doesn't fit loose like a regular collar. It fits high and tight on your neck. And if you think about people say, "Oh, it's painful to the dog to turn their head." If you, while you're listening unless you're driving, I don't want you to gag when you're driving, take your hand and make it like a karate chop and put it right up under your chin as hard as you can. All right. It doesn't hurt. Okay. It changes my voice a little bit. Doesn't it really hurt? That's what a Head Halter engage on a dog throat is.

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Now go about an inch lower and put like a 10th of that pressure just a little bit. It hurts. You're going to get a gag. Because that's going across your trachea. Very, very soft. And that's what walking your dog on a flat collar will do.



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So, you don't want to walk your dog on a flat collar because you definitely can engage or damage the trachea. Right? So, number one, you want to make sure it's fitted properly. Up high, under the chin, so it can't slip down and go on their trachea, and tight around here, because if it's loose then when you engage the Head Halter, it goes up around the dog's eyes and sometimes the metal even pokes near their eyes.

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So, you want to do that and those of you who say, "Oh, I have a brachiocephalic dog." There's lots of Head Halters that fit brachiocephalic dogs. There's Peter Borchelt's Snoot Loop. With Tater Salad, who is brachiocephalic, we use a Comfort Trainer. It fits him beautifully. There are some dogs that Halti will fit. You don't want to have a fit that the dog can get it off. I personally have used a Gentle Leader for 30 years and all the dogs that I've trained fit properly. They work brilliantly. I like to put some Dr. Scholl's Moleskin on the nose strap just to make it softer. I don't know why they don't just build them on there. So, I digress.

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Okay. I use a Head Halter differently. All of that I make sure it properly fits. Number two, I mean this goes with knowing how I train, but don't ever, no matter if you're a balanced trainer or not, you should never pop a dog on a Head Halter. Don't collar correct, because that is a sharp snap to the neck. That should never happen. I mean, I personally think that you could eliminate collar corrections period, but that's a story for another day. So, make sure it property fits. Don't collar pop and do not use a retractable leash with a Head Halter ever because the dog can get out there and then click get engaged and yes, you're setting them up for not a good outcome.

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I'm not a big fan of retractable leashes in any instance, but again, opportunity to talk about that another time. So, here's how I do things differently. Number one, I think I have to earn the right to put a Head Halter on my dog. That starts by number one, as I mentioned fully conditioning it, so my puppy or my dog sees a Head Halter and they go, "Oh yeah, can we do that please? I want to do that. That's good. Yeah, let's do that." Now after a month or two of using it, I might not get that reaction, but I still get kind of "Put my head in. Yeah, I like that." You know, my dogs look at their Head Halters the way I look at my seatbelt. Yeah, put it on. It doesn't give me any joy anymore, but I put it on.

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All right. They don't pin their ears and pin their eyes. Okay. They don't pin their ears and get covering and lip lick and get walleyed on me. If they're doing that to you, you have not spent enough time and you, or you haven't properly conditioned that Head Halter. So fully condition it. Number two in how to earn the right to use a Head Halter, what the heck do you want your dog to do? So many people put the leash on and start walking down the street. What do you expect from your dog? And have you taught your dog that and do they fully understand what it is you expect?

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So, for my dogs, we have an area at my hip that I call reinforcement zone. That's where I would like you to stay with a nice loose leash walking up my side. So, I'll spend a lot of time building value for them, not with a cookie in my hand luring in them but building value for how to find that area. That reinforcement zone is where you're going to be and that brings a lot of joy when you are in that area.



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So, I want you to be in reinforcement zone. Number two, I want you to fully embrace the Collar Grab game, which is when I grab your collar, I'm going to give you a cookie. So as soon as I grab my dog's collar, they turn their head towards me. It's just an instant reaction. Pressure on my neck means turn my head towards the mama.

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Number three, if I say your name, you instantly head whip around. Right? So those are fully conditioned to Head Halter, so they love it. They understand what reinforcement zone is and where they should be. Then I'm going to make sure they understand the Collar Grab, their name and Hand Targets. So, these are tools that I can use if my dog and I come up upon a distraction when we're out walking.

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And you've got to assume that at some point you are going to come up upon a distraction somewhere while you're out walking. And then I'll start, once I've done all that, I'll put the Head Halter on at home in one room, and I will reinforce a dog for walking in a straight line, maybe two steps, get it off, party time. You know when you end with the dog getting it off before they start pawing that's a success. If the dog's pawed that is not a success. So, conditioning it with very short bursts that end with it getting off and you're playing tug or having fun.

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All right. Walking short distance, building up to a longer distance, getting it off, walking with a turn, walking with two turns and then a change of direction. So, a change of direction is great if you are with your little something pooh and you see that big friendly old lab walking towards you, and you know your little something pooh doesn't have the confidence just yet to deal with that face on face meeting. So, what I do is I turn into my dog, so my dog is walking beside me, and I see that that big old friendly lab is coming towards us. I turn into my dog, so they were walking on my left when I turned into them, they're now walking on my right. I do a complete circle and now we're passing that big friendly lab with my something pooh on my right side. And I'm the one that is passing shoulder to shoulder with the lab, not my something pooh.

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All right. So, remember I'm driving my automobile, AKA the car, and I'm always mirror checking and making sure the environment is great for that automobile, AKA dog. And so, when I see that big old friendly lab or whatever it is that my dog might be worried from, I'm doing that turn in change side long before I ever have to. And if I've done that in my living room, my puppy loves doing that. My dog is going to love doing those lane changes, turning into them, getting on the other side. All right.

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So that has given me the right to go out and try it in a new environment. So, I've been doing it in the living room. I might do it in my bedroom. Then I might do it in the bathroom. Then I might do it in the backyard. All of that's happening with virtually zero distractions to the dog. I want you to go and review [episode number 24](#), where I talked about the Distraction Intensity Index. When we are now ready to take this Head Halter out for the walk in the wild, you are going to make sure that you're going to the lowest Distraction Intensity Index.



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So, you're not going to take this dog freshly learned about this Head Halter over the past several weeks in your home. And you're not going to go to like a bunny farm. Where the distraction index is way high, right? You're going to go to lower distraction indexes and just rehearse success, rehearse success. What we're doing while you're doing it my way is you are rehearsing success, but there may come a time where your dog goes, "Oh, butterfly." And they won't stay in reinforcement zone and they go towards the butterfly or whatever that distraction is. And this is what it looks like.

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I've got my leash in the opposite hand to where my dog is. All right. So, I'm going to gather it up and I've got my dog here. See how that magically happens. If you are listening to this in the car, you're going to have to come back and watch this on YouTube. So, my dog is walking, and they say, "Butterfly." So, the first thing you do, isn't grab for your dog because that's a moving target and you can't control that movement.

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What you can control is your right arm, which is pinned to your side. I'm going to say that again, leashes gathered up, pinned at your side. And because you are the driver's ed coach by this point, and you know that your dog is looking at the butterfly and about to lunge towards it. What you're going to do is grab for the leash in your hand, in a baseball grip.

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So, my hand is here. This hand comes with a thumb pointed towards the other hand, right? Baseball grip. I quickly slide this hand down the leash until I get to the clip under the chin of the dog and all I'm going to do— Now, my thumb is down. I'm going to turn my wrist so that my thumb is up, which turns the dog's head towards me. I'm going to then back up six steps gently. I'm not saying anything to the dog, and then I'm going to let the leash go and give them a choice. And if their choice is to go, "Oh, what are we doing here? You just grabbed my collar. Am I going to get a cookie?" I'm going to say, "good dog." Maybe walk a couple steps.

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And if you can stay in reinforcement zone, I'm going to feed. But if the dog goes, "Three butterflies!" now I'm going to quickly do the same thing, but I'm going to not back away six steps. I'm going to double the distance and I'm going to keep doubling the distance. I'm going to keep doing this, doubling the distance, doing this, double the distance.

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One time when I did this with my dog, my Border Collie Buzz, I actually had to get a football field away from the distraction because I didn't follow the DII, the distraction index intensity. I didn't realize how distracting he would find a big old lab doing agility. So, he was going cray-cray. I had to go one football field away.

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Why do I do this? Because I walk a little bit, I let go and I say, it's your choice. Would you like to do what I think I've built tons of value for you to do, which is sit with me or would you like to go back to the distraction? I don't want to control you. I want you to make the choice. And if they say I'm going back to the distraction, then I double the distance. Remember that DII, the distraction intensity index.



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I'm lowering the intensity by doubling the distance. Now, if in the first six steps I walk away and my dog is still like got their eyes back at the distraction and they're almost red lining "Oh, oh! Butterflies, butterflies, butterflies." Then I'm not going to let go. I'm just going to keep backing. I'm going to double that distance. I'm going to let go of the head when I feel that I have a chance for the dog to choose correctly. Now this isn't a correction. I'm not going, "You jerk! You were not doing what I said." I'm completely okay with whatever my dog chooses. Swiftly down the leash, turn their head towards me, back away, let go.

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Remember that behaviour chain, I'm not going to turn their head away, back away, give a cookie. I'm going to turn their head away, back away, release. Let them make the choice and they go, "Hey yeah, you just collar grabbed. So that means we're going to do something. That's cool." I might walk a couple steps. I might sit and then I'll give them a cookie.

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Now, what about when you're driving your dog, AKA you know car and you see a high-level distraction up ahead? Because you've been doing your mirror checks. I would step off that path. Get as far away as I can. Don't try to do the turn into your dog and walk on opposite, you know, with the dog, that distance isn't going to be big enough. Get off the path, get deep off the path, ask your dog to sit and then just reinforce them for calmly sitting when that distraction goes by.

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Or ask for hand targets, that's where your hand target comes in. Because sitting means they can keep looking at what that distraction is, but hand targets they're more focused on you. Or even if it's a higher drive dog, tug, because tug puts them into a higher arousal state where they're more likely to ignore that dog. Now, you know how I use a Head Halter. Why I do it this way is dogs who are walked on a harness, on a flat collar, on a pinch collar, on any other type of collar. They are more likely to get those sources of reinforcement from their environment.

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Higher, higher levels of reinforcement from the environment. Picking something off the ground, jumping on people, chasing bicycles, chasing cars, reacting to a squirrel. They will get that and even while you pull them away on their flat collar, or if you're, I hope you're not having them on a chain collar or anything else, you might be popping them. They're still staring at what they want, which is reinforcing. If you're saying, "Hey, hey, hey! Leave it." You are giving them attention what is reinforcing.

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So, all of the environmental reinforcements, they get to rehearse the undesired behaviour, which is building reinforcement for their undesired behaviour. Dogs who are walked on a Head Halter get far more reinforcement from their owners because their owner is mirror checking, being aware of their environment, building up reinforcement for what they want, not allowing any rehearsals of the undesired behaviour. So, my dogs get higher value of reinforcement for walking and playing with me and much, much lower value of reinforcement for anything in their environment. You know, it's as close to zero as you're going to get. My goal, the moment I put a dog on a Head Halter is to get them off of a Head Halter.



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But the mistake people make is they go, "Hey, I've had a good, you know, three weeks of this what Susan is saying working, my dog isn't reacting as much. Everything's going great. I think I'm going to try it with a Head Halter off." You don't take that Head Halter off unless you're willing to bet me and you could turn to your BFF or your spouse and say, "Hey, I'm going to try Jimmy with a Head Halter off today. I'll bet you a thousand dollars, I don't have any failures." If you don't feel comfortable making that bet, don't take the Head Halter off.

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And what I do when I'm ready to take that Head Halter off and I go to a very low DII environment and I keep the Head Halter on but I clip the clip of the leash onto my dog's flat collar. So, they walk around with a Head Halter. And if, when they see a distraction and I back away those six steps, they turn their head and keep going at the distraction, I quickly unclip and clip to the Head Halter and we go back to a month on the Head Halter. Right.

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It's a simple process that brings success because of the **clarity of expectations** that it brings through the dog. And it is the kindest way to get that expectation across. I mean, it'd be great if our dogs never ever had to see environment or distractions for the first year of their life while we're socializing them and getting them out and about. But that's not real because they are going to see distractions. So, we need to set them up with the most humane tools, used in the most humane way that helps build your relationship. And it doesn't create that kind of tension and restrictions that the dog was going to show you when they are afraid as I mentioned in [episode 39](#).

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That's it for this episode of Shaped by Dog. A lot of things to digest for you but leave me a comment. Let me know what you think. And again, this topic came from one of you. So if you have a topic you'd like me to cover, I'd be more than happy to share what it looks like to be in Do-Land and creating a relationship with your dog, that every activity that you do, every training decision that your dog makes helps to bring you two closer and never shuts the dog down or gets them worried about you. That's it for today.

Resources:

[Blog Post: How Do I Train My Dog NOT to Jump Up?](#)

[Podcast Episode 29: Understanding and Preventing Reactivity and Aggression in Your Dog](#)

[Podcast Episode 39: Is a Resistant Dog a Stubborn Dog?](#)

[Podcast Episode 4: T.E.M.P. \(Tail, Eyes/Ears, Mouth, Posture\)](#)

[Podcast Episode 24: Help for the Dog who Chases Chipmunks, Bicycles, and the Neighbor's Cat](#)

[Video Blog Post: How do I Stop My Dog from Pulling on the Leash?](#)

[Video Blog Post: Quick Tip for Dog Walking and Distractions](#)



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About Susan

A world-leading educator of dog trainers, Susan is also one of the most successful agility competitors of the last three decades. She has won multiple Gold Medals at National or World Championship events with every dog she has ever owned over the past 30 years. Susan was one of the very first dog trainers to share knowledge online when she opened her "Clicker Dogs" website many years ago. Susan has helped hundreds of thousands of people enjoy a great relationship with their dogs through her workshops and keynote speaking around the world, award winning books, DVDs, magazine articles, blog posts, podcasts, free dog training and dog agility video series, and online dog training programs.



A natural teacher and an entertaining speaker, Susan is world renowned for her dog training knowledge and practical application of that knowledge. Her understanding of how to apply science-based learning principles to both competitive and family pet dog training has been pivotal in changing how dogs are trained.

Susan is now helping many thousands of dog owners in 82 countries have the best relationship possible with their dogs. The real joy for her comes from bringing confidence to dogs and their owner through playful interactions and relationship building games that are grounded firmly in the science of how animals learn.



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