

Behavior Chain: Are You Teaching Your Dog To be Bad To be Good?

Speaker Key

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Transcript

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SG Hey everybody, welcome to Shaped by Dog. I am Susan Garrett and what if I was to tell you that your dog's absolute worst behavior, your biggest challenge, the thing that drives you the most cray cray could very likely be there because you have been unintentionally or accidentally reinforcing it. Yes. The thing that you would like to get rid of the most, you may actually have been rewarding it all along.

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So, I'm talking about things like dogs jumping on your guests or stealing food from the counter or the garbage or pulling and lunging at other dogs on leash or barking at you, maybe when you're trying to make their food, or when you're getting ready to go for, take them for a car ride or go to the park, maybe just barking at window as people pass by. Your dog getting on the furniture or this one, which actually came into our free Facebook group, a dog that when they're on the way out of the park, lies down, puts on the brakes and will not go. Or a dog that you throw their toy and they don't bring it all the way back and you actually have to go out and get it yourself.

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So, all of these things or any other things, I'm just giving you some examples. They could very well be there because you have been accidentally rewarding the dog. True story. First of all, let's talk about what are reinforcers or what are rewards? There's the obvious, right. For dogs who love food, there's food that rewards a dog. There are actually toys, some dogs like toys, some dogs don't like toys. Then there's activities.

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So, when you give a dog a permission to engage in an activity they love, like going for a swim or going for a car ride. When you give them permission, you are rewarding what they are doing before you gave them that permission. Your voice is a reinforcer, like our patting is reinforcing, right, touching them. And one of the big reinforcers for our dogs is our social attention because they are social creatures. They love being around us.

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So now that we have a list of all the things that could be rewarding the dog, let's talk about why or how you might actually have been reinforcing the thing you don't want, how you can recognize it and fix it. All right. Yeah. Got a lot of things to cover today. What I'm going to talk about is something called a behavior chain. All of these things that you may not have been wanting your dog to do, they all could have been reinforced in the form of a behavior chain.

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Now a behavior chain is a sequence of events or responses that are linked together either by cues or prompts. For example, I mean, there's so many examples of behavior change in everyday life, but let's take a toddler who were trying to teach them to put on their pants. So, it might be step one. We prompt them, put your butt on the ground. So, butt on the ground is step one. So, it might be a verbal prompt or verbal cue that we give them, but on the ground. And then we might say, find the fly, which means, you know, we want them to find the front of the pants rather than putting their pants on backwards.



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And then we might say, put one leg through and they put one leg through. And then poke out your foot so they poke out the foot. Now put the other leg through and poke out the foot. Now, stand up and pull up your pants. So, there might be, I don't know, seven or eight or nine different steps. Now at first you might be prompting each step with a verbal cue, but eventually the completion of one thing prompts the next. And that's how a behavior chain happens and how it works, is like we might learn to tie our shoe in stages, but it just flows together because the completion of getting the first synch means we know automatically to put the loop up and when we put the loop up, we know we have to wrap something around.

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So that's how behavior chains work in everyday life. One stage reinforces the one that happens at the, and the final reinforcement, the, "Oh good. My shoe is tied" reinforces every step in the chain. And that's why we never skip those steps because we get reinforced for doing them all by the end result.

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Okay. Now let's get back to dog training. The retrieve, a dog sits, they get the reinforcement of us bringing our arm back to throw something. If they hold that sit, then we're going to tell them they can go get the toy. When they get it and they bring it back and they're holding it, the reinforcement for holding it is we'll take it out of their mouth. And the reinforcement for them giving it to us is we might give them a cookie or very likely we might just throw that thing for them again.

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Each step in the chain gets reinforced by the permission or the carrying on of the chain. And the final reward is either something amazing happens or they get to catch or retrieve something again. Okay. Now let's go and look at those naughty behaviors. What happened most often is the dog has learned, they have to be bad to be good. Now I'm going to put the word "bad" in quotes because the dogs aren't bad. They're misunderstood at the best of times. Right. But let's just, I'm putting the word "bad" in quotes.

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My father loved this actress Mae West, and she had this line "When I'm good, I'm really good. But when I'm bad, I'm better." Right. So that's what the dog is learning when they're doing these behavior chains that is, they're better when they're bad. Because a lot of times dogs are so good, and we get busy in our life and we don't acknowledge they're good. And to get that social attention from us, they got to be bad to be good. All right.

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So, for example, our dogs jump on our guests. Now they get social attention from the guest because the guest goes, "Oh, isn't it cute." A lot of time it's nervous and they're planning never to visit you again, but that's another story. But our dogs jump on our guests and we, or you or anybody might say, "Off. Oh, I'm so embarrassed. Get off, get off, off." As soon as you give a cue "off", you have rewarded the dog for jumping up. Because number one, you've given them social attention. Number two, the word "off" is associated with reinforcement that they've earned when they learn the cue "off" and what happens next is the completion of the chain. That they get off and they sit and "hhhhaaaaa" there's cherubs that start singing and the dog is wonderful, and the dog then gets praised and might even give him a treat because he's sitting to greet somebody.



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But what you've actually done is you've reinforced all the pieces of the chain that happened before that sit, you reinforced them jumping on your guests. Got to be bad to be good here. Okay. Stealing food from the counter, same thing. Dog gets up and checks out what's on the counter, gets told to off, the dog gets off and you might say, "Good off. Good off" And please, if you do, be grammatically correct, remember it's "good offed". "Good offed. Good offed" cause they, you know, they already got off.

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So, and if you really want to be correct, go back and listen to [episode number 19](#), where I talked about one of my biggest pet peeves in dog training and that's the incorrect use of cues, but I digress. All right. So dog barking at you when you're doing whatever, pick up the keys to go for a car ride and they start spinning and barking in front of you and bouncing off you, or maybe when you're making their food. All right. So, what's happening is you say "quiet" or "get off" or "settle down" or "simmer down".

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You give them social attention, you - and what's worse is you keep carrying on walking towards that car. You keep preparing their food and say, "Hey, knock it off. You be quiet. That's enough." And you carry on that behavior chain and you are building in they're barking and spinning and bouncing off you into the chain. "Ah, it's amazing. Got to be bad to be good."

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Dog jumping on the furniture, same thing. Get off. Boom. Not retrieving a toy, you know, the dogs have drop it partway. A lot of that happens when people don't keep the chain of sit and hold position because a lot of times the dogs that are in motion, they like to get out there before the ball lands. And in order to get out there before the ball lands, they know they have to get you to move. Now they don't plan this, but dogs are brilliant at picking up patterns of reinforcement and they figure out that they can get out there sooner if you have to move further to get that ball. It's an amazing thing. Dogs are just amazing.

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That dog lying down on the way home from the park, a couple of things happening here. Number one, there's a ton of reinforcement at that park with the other dogs. Number two, the suggestion that came in in our free group from some other participant in the free group was, "Oh, just take a cookie out of your pocket and put it in front of his nose and get him moving." Tada! Got to be bad to be good. Because if I walk along beside you after we've been to the park, you're just ignore me. I'm not going to get any cookies, highly unlikely, but if I lie down, got to be bad to be good. You'll pull out the big meatball. Okay.

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That advice which is why when you go into a free group, don't take advice from just anybody. Take advice from somebody you respect, and you know has success with their own dogs and their own students. Okay. There's a bazillion experts out there on the internet. You got to be careful who you're listening to. Lunging at dogs. So, the dog lunges, they get told "leave it!" maybe get a collar correction. So, they're getting a word, they're getting a word that might be associated with "Good, leave it. Good." And then they get social attention because you get yelled at. You know, even when you're yelling at your dog, you're giving them social attention.



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Now, a dog lunging at another dog, 9 times out of 10 that's not the whole story. There could be a long history of maybe just curiosity and maybe anxiety and maybe a lack of confidence or it could have grown into all that aggression. That's another story. Okay. So, all of these are behavior chains though. It doesn't change anything. They are still behavior chains.

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And so, what I'm going to share with you next is how to fix it. How to remove your role and how to start creating a plan to get this better. Number one, please praise, acknowledge, interact, relate to your dog when they're being good. Don't make them have to be bad to be good. Now, please don't say, "Oh Susan, does this mean I have to carry cookies along all the time and always give my dog cookies and do, ah, do I—" Okay. If you praised your spouse because they look good in a certain dress back in 1982, does that mean you're off the hook and don't have to do it anymore? Or, you know, if you told your little girl that you were proud of her when she was in grade three, does that mean you don't have to reinforce her for anything anymore?

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You know what reinforcement builds behavior. It builds confidence. And so, reinforcement, I've already mentioned comes in many forms, treats are just one. You don't have to carry treats, but yes mix them some treats. My point is, look for an opportunity to catch your dog being brilliant. And don't miss that opportunity to tell them how amazing they are. That's number one, to break this chain.

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Number two, recognize where the reinforcement has come from you. Have you been giving them a word? Have you been giving them your attention? Even just looking at them, giving them the big hands on the hips and the sigh is giving them your attention. Right. So where have they been getting the reinforcement from you?

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I'll give you a great example of a behavior chain. Well, here's several, an easy example of how people take a simple behavior and turn it into a chain. So, something like when I call your name, come to me. That should be one behavior. It should not be a chain. It should be your name, boom come to me. But what happens is the dog might come part way and then you repeat the cue. "Come. No, Rover come." And the dog starts going and then gets distracted by and starts sniffing. "No. Rover come. No. Rover come."

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So, so you've now changed. The word come doesn't mean come directly to you because every time you repeat the cue, you reward Rover for stopping and sniffing or doing what it is he's doing. Another really good one. This is the behavior that not everybody will teach but you should because it's a fun behavior to teach and it's so good for your dog's fitness.

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The behavior is back up. So, when I ask my dog to back up, it's a single behavior. It means keep backing up until you fall off a cliff or I tell you to stop. I'm never going to have him fall off a cliff, but my dogs will back up a hundred, hundred feet if I asked them to. And all I would do is just say the word back and they would keep going.



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But what most people do is they say the word back, the dog backs up a couple steps, and then they go back again. And that goes a couple more steps and they keep repeating that cue and you've turned one behavior into a chain. Boom. Okay, so we're back to, I got carried away there. How are we going to fix it? Number one, look for an opportunity to catch your dog being good and so they don't have to be bad to be good. Number two, discover what your role is and where you've been accidentally reinforcing the bad by giving them a cue or your attention or permission or a toy or food or whatever.

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Number three, create clarity for what it is that you do want. So, your dog jumping on guests. How about we have something called the hot zone. And it is an area, a dog bed, a raised dog bed, a dog bed with sides, could be a mat, some area that your dog can earn reinforcement. That's their hot zone. So, they know with great clarity, what it is that they can do to be successful. Then number four, make what you don't want extremely difficult or impossible. For example, if you didn't have a great hot zone yet you could put your dog in an ExPen. Like I have from my puppy that, if you're watching this on YouTube, you can see This's little white ExPen.

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And so, your guest can come over to the ExPen and when the dog sitting, they can give them their attention. And when the dog isn't, they can turn and talk to you. Sitting, attention, turn and talk to you. Or this is something else, a member of my team said they were listening to one of my podcasts and their sister who isn't a dog trainer, who doesn't even own a dog right now was listening to the podcast and heard me talk about how people reinforce their dog with cues.

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And so, and how she hated when she went to her boyfriend's house and her dog like jumped on her. And so, she took my advice and when she went into the house, she just tossed some cookies on the floor. So, the dog didn't get a chance to jump up because she was so busy eating cookies. And before you know it, when she walked into the house, that dog never tried to jump up. Because the trigger was her association with her meaning look to the ground, not lambaste you against the wall. Okay.

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So, create what you want to be super easy and what you don't want to be difficult or next to impossible. So if you have a dog that lunges on leash at other dogs, go to [episode number 40](#) and [39](#), where I talked about conditioning and using a head halter so that you are not having to, you're going to stay calm and just reinforce the dog and create alternate behaviors rather than lunging at other dogs.

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And number five, rehearse the correct end of the chain many, many times. Like, ideally just the end. So, for example, if I wanted my dogs, let's say my dogs used to bark when I would mix their food. And so, what I did was I mixed their food at an odd time when I wasn't feeding them. I just mix their food and then I put it back in the fridge.

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And then at feeding time I put empty bowls out and they would go in their crates because that's what they do, but they don't normally bark then. But they'd go on their crates and then I praise them and just give them their full bowls. I'm just rehearsing the end of the chain. And then I delayed a little more.



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And then I might just do the end before the end, which is take the spoon and tap the end, the side of every bowl and then give them their bowls. See how excited Swagger is about all this. So, you want to rehearse just the end of the chain over and over, and then add the step before. It is called back chaining, building duration and creating more success, making it easier for the dog to be correct.

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So, for the dog who lays down on the way home from the park, what I would do is number one, start playing some fun games with your dog at home so they look forward to being home more than they look forward to being at the park. [Homeschool the Dog](#), or our [Recallers](#) gives you a number of great games, go to our website, [DogsThat.Com](#) and you'll see there how you can become a member of either one of those programs.

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Also, in the meantime, what I would do is I would just for now take your car to the park. And then at different times, rehearse getting in the car, getting a big reward, getting out, getting in the car, getting a big award, getting out. So now at the end of the park, it's getting in the car, get a big reward, get home, and then play some of those fun games at home. And every time you go to the park, when you get home, just play three minutes of fun games. Then your dog is going to look forward to being home more than they're looking forward to being at the park. All right.

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And the emergency. If your dog is caught in one of these behavior chains, what you want to do is interrupt the chain, right? So like the Surgeon General tries to interrupt the chain for smokers by putting those big warnings on the stickers, right? Because their behavior chain is open the pack, take out the cigarette, light it, smoke it. While this interruption it's a really lame one. And let me tell you, you interrupting your dog's behavior chain isn't fixing it. It's just stopping that one rehearsal. But it allows you to get a game plan.

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So, interrupt the chain. So, the dog is stealing food from the counter, don't tell him no, don't tell him off, just walk in, quietly take them by the collar and walk them over to his hot zone. You've interrupted the chain, now go to your drawing board and say, how can I make the correct behavior far more attractive than the incorrect behavior more difficult if not impossible.

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Praise your dog when they're amazing. So, they don't have to be bad to be good. Think of times when you've inadvertently reinforced your dog, when he was being bad in order to be good. Create clarity for what you want, prevent what you don't want, rehearse the end of the correct chain, and when you have an emergency interrupt that behavior chain, so it doesn't continue. That's it for Shaped by Dog. Love to hear from you. Please leave me a comment. We'll see you next time on Shaped by Dog.





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Resources:

[Podcast Episode 2: Reinforcement](#)

[Podcast Episode 33: How Do I Stop My Dog Counter Surfing?](#)

[Podcast Episode 19: One of My Biggest Pet Peeves in Dog Training](#)

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

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

[Podcast Episode 40: Using a Head Halter on a Dog, Why My Approach is so Different](#)

[Home School the Dog](#)

[Recallers](#)

[DogsThat.Com](#)



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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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