

Using Coincidences and Positive Associations in Dog Training

Speaker Key

SG Susan Garrett

Transcript

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SG Hey everybody. Welcome to Shaped by Dog. I am Susan Garrett and today I'm going to share with you why your training up to this point in your dog's life may not have worked the way you would have liked it to have worked. And how you can change it with a pretty simple little set of progressions that I'm going to put forth for you.

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And why do I know this is going to work? Because it's worked for every dog I have ever raised and rescue dogs, as well as puppies that I brought into my home. And it's worked brilliantly well for the thousands of students that have gone through our online program. Currently we have 10,000 students in our online program. Probably more now because we just had a huge number just add, come to [Home School the Dog](#). Why? Because this system works and I'm going to share with you what that looks like.

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But first I want to share with you a review. I love reading the reviews, please leave me a review. I will possibly read yours. This podcast review comes from Elena C. And she wrote, "I went through the Home School the Dog free dog training program when COVID started and now I'm loving your programs. And I see how since then my dog related approach changed a lot and for the better for both me and my dog. But what I find even more interesting is that I think it is also influenced my life philosophy."

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"I'm more empathetic to behaviours I don't fully understand of dogs and of humans. I'm more patient to give my dog time to adjust and feel comfortable and confident. But the same is true to my two-year-old nephew who needs time to feel confident in new environments. And even my boyfriend who doesn't like crowded spaces, he needs time to adjust. Now some of the topics you've talked about seem common sense and so strange it wasn't this way just a half a year ago. So, thank you so much for doing a great job."

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Well, thank you Elena C. and to your boyfriend, you're welcome. And what I'm talking about are principles of behaviour that apply to all animals, right? It's not just dogs. This will work for cats and horses. And guess what? I've trained a lot of different animals. Cows, loved, loved, loved cows. I've trained cows, I've trained marine mammals. I digress. Let's get to today's topic. My goal when I am raising a dog is to create positive associations, with the things I would like the dog to consider great.

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And I'd like those positive associations come through me. Now I look at life quite often through the eyes of my dog. I see dogs walking down the street and I look at life through their eyes just for that moment or two that they passed me. From the eyes of the dog, I'd like the dog to think that somehow this is all a big coincidence.



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So, I'm actually arranging coincidences for my dog. For example, you go out, the dogs just hanging around going, "Well, can't get Netflix. I don't know how to use the remote. What's this garbage can here?" and tips it over and then "What a coincidence! There're leftovers in the garbage. And I love leftovers."

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So that arranging of coincidences for the dog will lead him to try the garbage bin again. Do you see how it works? Now unfortunately that positive association doesn't go through you, it goes through you leaving and the dog getting nosy. While, you're leaving. So, what I would like to set up are positive associations through me. I'm going to give you another example and this one is true life.

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So, a student who came here not too, too long ago with a new puppy and the puppy came in on leash. And as the dog was coming through the door, she had her arms full with other things and the puppy came in on leash so she couldn't even see what the puppy was doing because she had her arms full with the crate and everything else. And the puppy jumped on an adult dog who was going by, got snarled at, not a positive association. And then when she turned the corner, somebody had an open bowl of dog treats, puppy grabs it in his mouth, and now he's straining at the leash way out ahead of her, grabs his mouth dives into the treats, she doesn't even know that he's eating them and I have to bring it to her attention.

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And so, the puppy has learned, "Okay. Run as hard as I can at the end of the leash and really good things could happen. I could find some really tasty treats." So, then she gets herself set up by explaining what we're going to do. I said, "You know, we're just going to do a simple recall and she immediately takes her dog off leash before I could say anything.

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Now the dog starts, you know, sniffing and going around inside the building and grabs a toy and starts doing loops. So, so many positive associations, none of them with what you'd want the dog to have positive associations with. The dog is learning the moment I get free from you, take off and grab what you can find. "Oh, here's a toy that I like. Yeah, now let's play keep away." It didn't have to be that way. Imagine if she had come to the class and ideally had a second crate, left her dog in the car, brought her crate in, and her treats in and set everything up. Had a little chat with me to discuss what we were going to do.

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And I would have then said, carry your puppy in because there's a lot of activity going on here. Now I granted some of you have, you know, massively large puppies. You know, last month I went and talked to somebody in their home with their Great Dane puppy. They aren't carrying that puppy under their arm into the building. But in this case, it was a little Border Collie.



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Carry your puppy into the building and then I would like you immediately to start playing game of tug. So that's the first association. That's easy to create value for something the puppy loves that comes through me. And then our first recall I would've said, let's just keep him on leash until we can see what kind of focus he has. So, it allows you to create positive associations through you.

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Things that you love in life come through you. Okay. So back to this progression chart, this is a simple progression chart I have probably used for 20 years of my students. It starts with the very first time you start training your dog. And guess what? If you say, "Oh Susan, that ship has sailed. My dog's eight years old and he's learned a lot of things." It doesn't matter. Tomorrow could be your very first time. You could just say, we're starting over.

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So, at the very beginning of training, there are two things that could happen. The correct behaviour, what I'd really like to see the dog do and the incorrect behaviour that would I'd rather the dog not do. Now unfortunately, a lot of people just think it's a flip of a coin and it's 50-50. It's not that way because if my puppy chooses an incorrect behaviour, chances are it was a test on my part. I'll get to that in a little bit, just hold on. All right.

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So early on, the first progression is brand new to training. That's, you know, I would say my puppy who is 11 weeks old now, we are not brand new to training. We are, you know, we've progressed along this chart. But brand new, this is what we did, the correct behaviour. What I wanted my dog to see was extremely easy for my puppy to be correct. I altered the environment.

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So, it was almost impossible for her to choose incorrectly. So, I might've taken her into my bedroom and fenced off an area with an [ExPen](#) and gone in there and trained a game like [ItsYerChoice](#). So not only are we in a small environment, I may even have had her on a leash and [ItsYerChoice](#), and if you haven't played [ItsYerChoice](#) just go to the show notes and we'll send you a link on how to do that.

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So, [ItsYerChoice](#), the correct behaviour is simple. Just don't jump up at my hand and I'll open it and you could get a cookie. So early on in training, the correct behaviour is extremely easy. And what that does is it increases trust between the dog and I, they know the moment they set foot on the ground to look to me because good things could be happening with me. It increases trust, and it starts to pave the way to increase confidence in the dog making choices that leads to their own reinforcement. Okay, so early on, it's extremely easy for them to be successful and we're establishing a transfer of value.

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What you find of value, and early on my puppy might only find food and maybe chasing a toy. They may not even find tugging a value yet, but food and chasing a toy might be the two things that they value. Extremely easy to earn that value. Now the incorrect behaviour, extremely difficult. I mean, it's super hard, but it is never impossible. And that is important the way I train, I always want my puppy or dog to be making a choice.



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So, when I'm playing ItsYerChoice, it's not impossible. You can choose to ignore the food. And if you do choose that, then I know I have set you up to fail because I didn't choose a high enough value food, or I didn't choose an environment where you could feel safe enough to play a game with me, or I didn't choose a time when you were hungry rather than satiated. Like maybe I tried to play it right after a meal.

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So, the incorrect behaviour early on in my chart, I've got correct behaviour extremely easy, incorrect behaviour extremely difficult, but not impossible because we want the choice. And early on, it would be things like ItsYerChoice, it would be tug, it would be [Crate Games](#) where it's super easy for the dog to be successful but it's not impossible, they still are making choices. Now, as we progress, the stages I'm telling you are early, mid and very late on in your dog's training. And there isn't like a time and age. It is a layering of confidence that takes you through these stages.

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So, the mid stages. Now the correct behaviour, isn't quite so easy. So, as I move from early into mid, it would be things like I might be playing tug with my puppy with a bowl of chicken in front of her. I ask you to tug, well she has to make a choice. "I really would like to take that chicken, but you asked me to tug. All right, I made a choice. I'm going to tug." So, the correct behaviour is easy, but the environment has been altered such that you could choose incorrectly. But my puppy or my dog won't, I would say 99.9% of the time, they will choose what I want because I've built that trust and I can predict what my dog is going to do.

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So, the mid stages of training, confidence is erupting in my dog or puppy because we have laid down foundation of correct after correct after correct after correct. And then when they've made the incorrect choice, it's easy for me to control the environment so they don't have a positive association with that incorrect behaviour, like running off with a toy and playing keep away. So, I would never take my puppy outside and throw a toy and expect that it's coming back to my hand. That would be setting myself up for failure because I wouldn't know with great certainty that it would happen. So, I would never do it.

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All right. So mid stages, confidence is growing and there are more choices for my dog to make so the correct behaviour becomes slightly more difficult. The incorrect behaviour I am now tempting. There are more opportunities to choose to do something else. So instead of playing in a little ExPen where I might've started with an eight-week-old or seven-week-old puppy, now I might be playing in a bathroom.

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You could go and play with the doorstep, but you're not going to, because of all those layers I've put in. I've increased the environment where I'm asking the puppy to play with me, which means I'm increasing options puppies can find amazing things to play with it in a bathroom no less. There's toilet paper rolls, there's toilet brushes, there's the doormat on the spring, "doing doing doing doing", there's so many things. So, I'm giving them, I'm tempting them with more environmental choices, but they will make the correct choice 99.9% of the time, because this progression has been super slow.



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Now in that bathroom I might play short retrieve blocks that teach the puppy how much value it is to put a toy in my hand. And if you're on my Home School the Dog program, you know what I'm talking about, our *Bring Me Program* right. Now as we progress from mid to late, late stages, this is where my adult dogs are now. Where there is no where I could take them.

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I could take them into the middle of some deer. I just, every time I say that statement, I think about Fenton in the park, in the UK. If you haven't seen that video, you've got to Google it. It's so funny. I feel bad for Fenton and Fenton's owner and those deer, but that's another story. I could take my dogs into the middle of that park with the deer and if the deer started to run and my dog might even take one step towards, I might just have to say to them, "Yeah, we're not doing that. Come on. We're going this way." I wouldn't have to raise my voice. I wouldn't have to get mad. I wouldn't have to throw things, I wouldn't have to. No, we're just not doing that.

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So, in these late stages the correct behaviour might be extremely difficult for my dog to get, because there's so many environmental choices for them. They could choose to follow the smell of a deer. They could choose to eat rabbit poop. They could choose to roll in something that smells really good over here. They could choose to chase a kid on a bike. They could, they would never do it because of how we have progressed through each stage.

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The correct behaviour is extremely difficult but if you follow this progression, what you're doing, whenever you, I come to a new environment or new challenge, my dogs, it's just like a challenge. And they're like, "Yeah, well, that was easy. What else do you got?" They're proving to you how amazing they can be. They're proving to you how trustworthy they are. They're proving to you that there is nothing that they won't choose over you and what you would like them to do.

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So, at the late, late stages in training, the correct behaviour could be incredibly difficult and the incorrect behaviour so easy, so easy. But they're going to choose correctly because you have moved through these progressions super slowly. And that's what my online students, the Home School the Dog students and our [Recallers](#) students, or even my [Handling360](#) students, my [Agility](#) students, we're building understanding confidence and trust so the dogs are like, "Yeah, I got this sister. Yeah, you just hold it there. I can do whatever it is you would like me to do."

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And that's why it seems like there's this magical connection between professional trainers like myself and our dogs, that there's this, you know, mind meld, we're on the same page. My dogs look at life like I've arranged coincidences for everything, "You've got a tug toy?! I want a tug toy!" And all of the associations that are amazing in their world, all of those positive associations that they got from a puppy, from an adolescent, from adult dog, all the way up, all of those positive associations came through me.



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And I made sure that if I couldn't control or wasn't a 100% sure of what association would be built, then I just controlled their environment until I evaluated what that would look like. I hope now you have a greater understanding of how to create positive associations through you and start arranging coincidences so your dog is amazed at how things work out when they listen to what you want.

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But remember, start at the very easy level. Create an environment that is almost impossible for them to fail. And if you haven't done so yet, check out some of our games like ItsYerChoice or [Crate Games](#) and these are things that can start arranging coincidences for your dog.

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I'll see you next time on Shaped by Dog.

Resources:

[Blog Post: Teaching Puppies: It's Just Arranging Coincidences](#)

[Game: Learn How to Play ItsYerChoice \(IYC\)](#)

[Crate Games Online](#)

[Home School the Dog](#)

[Recallers](#)

[Handling360](#)



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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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