

Why Balance Breaks Fast Track Your Dog Training

Speaker Key

SG Susan Garrett

Transcript

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SG Today is a super big day for you. Because today on the podcast, I am sharing one thing that I do in my dog training - that I do intentionally in my dog training - that makes all the difference in the world. I'm going to share with you what it is, why it's important and how I do it, and the exact mechanics on how I do it. Because if you mess this up, bad things will happen. I mean not dangerous, but like, you know, not great.

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Okay. Hey, I'm Susan Garrett. Welcome to Shaped by Dog. All of this is going to be free. Free, because it comes in the form of a podcast and of course, podcasts are free. However, if you're watching this on [YouTube](#), you could show your appreciation by giving me a thumbs up right now. That would be awesome. Okay. That's— you know, everyone appreciates reinforcement, not exactly what I had in mind, but you know, I appreciate the thought. Within the body of what I've got for you, I'm going to give you a five-step formula for your training.

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You keep this checklist close to your heart. Print it out and if you follow it every time you train your dog, Kaboom! Like I think little cherubs will be singing, you know like “aaahhh”, every time you train your dog, that good things are going to happen. I promise you. So, I'm going to start right off. I'm just going to tell you what those five steps are. And if you are listening to this in the car, I promise you will want to take notes. But don't take notes when you're driving. Trust me, I've tried that. Was not a really good plan. What you should do is come back and watch this on YouTube with a pen and paper and take notes.

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Okay. So really quick. I'm going to whip through these five steps and then I'm going to go back re-track and tell you what I mean by all of them. The first two we've talked about on many podcasts before number one *have a plan*. So, before you get your dog out, Bob Bailey my mentor, he says, “think, plan, do, and together we've added the word review after. Think about what you need to fix. Plan out your training, do - meaning train your dog - and then review what you've done via the video that you've got. That's a little bit of foreshadowing because number two is *manipulate your environment*.

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Here on Shaped by Dog, check out the episode called [the art of manipulation](#), where I talked about how you could be saving a ton of time in your training when you manipulate your environment. Along with that manipulation of your environment, is you decide where you're going to post - put your video - so you can record what you're doing.

So, step one, have a plan. Step two manipulate your environment. Step three *get your dog's focus*. Before you do anything, get your dog's focus and drive. Get them so that they're like, “Yeah! What are we going to do? This is going to be so much fun”. Think about dog training, like starting a motorcycle. Right? So, I would preface this and apologize to all you motorcycle people that I know nothing about motorcycles.



Why Balance Breaks Fast Track Your Dog Training

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I've written on them a few times, but I've never owned one. But in my hallucination, the process goes like this. You've got your motorcycle covered with your beautiful motorcycle cover. You take the tarp off. You push it out to the middle of the driveway. Then you kickstart it, you know, kind of, and then you give it the juice. Okay. Well, step number three, get your dog's focus and drive. That's getting the juice.

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That's revving up the engine. Because if you don't do this, you still have that dog, you know, kind of undercover. Not really what? Not really focused or ready to do anything with you. So, step number three, get your dog's focus and desire to train.

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Step number four *train a thin slice of the behavior over a thin slice of time*. So, let's say you plan on training for five minutes. You might just train a little bit of the behavior, let's say in 10 or 15 seconds. And then you're going to do the Ninja secret that I'm going to tell you about later. And that is in step number five, which is *inject joy between the slices*.

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And with you inject joy between the slices, what you're ending up with is like a joy sandwich called your training session, right? So, there's a bunch of analogies in there for you, you know, your training session as a motorcycle or as a joy sandwich. You pick what you want. I think it was in early 1990s, I was teaching at a Behavior conference.

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And I taught this acronym, which I shared with all my students and it is DASH (D.A.S.H.). And all these years later, it's still pertinent to everybody who trains a dog. First get the D the dog's desire to work with you. And then you work on the A, which is accuracy and that thin slice of a behavior, just a little bit of the accuracy.

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And from working on the accuracy, your dog's confidence will grow and with confidence, you get the S which is speed. So, you don't want a dog when you ask it to sit, to kind of look around and pick its nails and think about it and then slowly lower their butt to the ground. You want them when you say sit to boom sit.

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And so that speed comes from the understanding of the criteria of what you're looking for. We built our training in layers interjected with what guys, right, joy. So that we've got *desire, accuracy, speed*. And the last, H of dash is *habitat* and that is our dog's need to work in many different locations for behaviors to generalize.

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You know, people say, "Well, he can do it in the backyard." If you've ever said, but he can do it in the backyard or, but he does it at home, it means that you have not generalized that behavior. You haven't taken it on the road and gone to enough locations for your dog. How many locations is enough? I don't know. It really is a hundred percent dependent upon your dog.



Why Balance Breaks Fast Track Your Dog Training

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My first Border Collie Stoney was brilliant, and I basically trained in two locations, my living room and the training school, where I was working. And then I went out and started trialing her. And she was amazing always. Now, one of my Terriers, Decaf, I probably trained her in hundreds of locations before she really was as confident as she could be.

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Right. So, I didn't have a set number. Just the more that you train in the different locations, the more you generalize that great behavior. So, H is habitat. And the habitat could be your living room, your dining room, your kitchen, your front yard, your backyard, your lower level. So, all of those are different H's. DASH. So those are the five steps. DASH represents really the last three.

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And what I want to talk about is number five. And that is injecting joy between the slices. Because, and this is what I've been doing pretty much for the last twenty-five years, maybe longer in my dog training. And I've observed the change of my dog. And what we call this is taking **balance breaks** within your training.

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You want to train maybe for 10 or 15 seconds and then break it off and do a balance break. I'm going to tell you now what a balance break looks like, what the rules are when you're using a balance break and why it's so important to do them. So, what is a balance break? It's a break in the action for your dog.

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For me often, it's a retrieve. I'll use it as a reinforcement - for reinforcing something the dog's doing. And then I might throw a toy, she brings it back and we have a nice game of tug. It could be if your dog doesn't like food or toys, it could be hand targets and you run away. It's something that changes the dog's physiology.

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It increases the dog's heart rate. It gets them more excited. So that's what a balance break is. And this is why it's so amazing. First of all, it decreases the intensity of your focus as a trainer and it decreases the intensity of your dog's focus. So that it's like a release, right? It shifts the dog from their thinking part of their brain to more of their instinctive part of their brain, where they're not having to make decisions or be, you know, they're just all-out having fun.

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It's like a release of pressure for the dog. So, it's like onstage where everyone's looking at you and they're making evaluations. Okay, everyone might just be you. But off-stage is something completely different. So, when I walk out on stage, you know, well now I love it so that there isn't pressure. But at first there was pressure about, we know all these people that I'm speaking to.

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And so, for people who were a little worried about speaking in front of people, there's a lot of pressure. And when you get off-stage it's the release of pressure. A balance break is your off-stage release of pressure for the dog.



Why Balance Breaks Fast Track Your Dog Training

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And honestly, if you're doing your job right as a dog trainer, you should be all in focused on the movement, the nuances of what's going on with your dog when they're training. And you can't hold that focus for more than a minute or two at the most. So, for me, I like to do it in, count it by the seconds so I can release it and then get back into the zone and get back into that training.

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So, another reason why balance breaks are just so important is if you are working on a behavior like maybe it involves a bed or a prop of some sort. When you do a balance break and you throw the reward it gives you a little space of transition so that you can move around training props and the dog doesn't notice because the key to really good dog training is to keep everything flowing so that the dog doesn't have any downtime where their navel gazing going, "are we training?" or "what are you doing over there with those beds and the sticks and everything?".

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So, when you're using a balance break to transition it gives you— now, obviously you can't like build an arc or anything, but you can just maneuver something that you had up on a shelf. "Okay. I'm going to train with this piece of equipment next and boom", you know your dog, it comes right back, you play game of tug, or you can tug while you're moving a bed across the room or opening a crate door.

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Okay. So, it gives you that little moment in time where you can connect your spaces in the training, but there isn't that downtime for the dog. It allows you to evaluate how much your dog loves what you were just doing.

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So, for example, if I was doing Hot Zone and I was reinforcing my puppy for being in their bed, and then I did a balance break and I, you know, maybe threw their toy and they brought it back and we played, and I took the toy out of their mouth. What they did next would tell me how good of job I did with my last training session.

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If they jumped right back in their bed, that would tell me, "Wow, I'm doing a good job. Just stay on the right track." If they started sniffing around and wandering it would tell me, "Well, I didn't go do as good a job as I thought I did." Because the value hasn't transferred from the rewards into the, this case, the dog bed or whatever it is that I was training.

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Okay. Number five. And this is a biggie for our balance breaks. It's an injection of joy. For you the handler, like a lot of the times, it's just a— I laugh at my dog. It's we have fun together. And then you go from balance break to training. And back into balance break and back into training. So, there's this great flow and what ends up happening is you're creating more and more focus for your dog because there isn't downtime in the training. Because training ends up being a joy for the dog.

That it evolves as every training session you do is building your relationship better and better and better so that you end up with a dog that can't be distracted because they just love what they're doing with you.



Why Balance Breaks Fast Track Your Dog Training

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However, there's going to be a however. There are rules because a balance break is reinforcement. It's saying to your dog, I love what you're doing right now, let's take a little break and then we're going to come back and we're going to do more of what you were just doing right now. So there needs to be guidelines that you follow, and I'm going to share them with you right now.

Okay, so the rules for your balance break, number one, recognize it's a reinforcement. So, here's what I see so many people do. They're training their dog and the dog gets more, you know, they were doing, the dogs going along and they're doing really good work. They're quick, they're engaged, they're having fun. And you let that session go a little too long.

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And then the dog's attention starts waning. Their focus for work starts— they've just, you know, the pressure has been too much. You didn't give them a break. And when I say pressure, I don't mean that you're hurting them. I just mean that intense gaze, the intensity and the focus that you're putting on them.

And so, then they start getting sloppy or getting distracted and that's when people take a balance break. And they go, "Oh yeah, we probably went too long. Oh, here you go." Now you might have to do that once in a while, but if you do give yourself a little smack in the back of the head to remind you, that's not good dog training. Once in a while is not going to kill anything.

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But ideally, it's not going to happen again. So, going to go to your, you know, you're going to watch this on video cause your videoing your training session and you're going to go "Yeah, that was an ill-advised balance break right there." So, balance break when things are going well. It's going to be hard. It's going to seem counterintuitive. Things are going fantastic. I need to stop. "How's that make sense Susan?" Trust me on it. It makes sense.

All right. So, number one, **take a balance break when your dog is doing great**. For me and my training— what I'm going to do is I'm going to post a video to the YouTube channel. Just a little video of me training my puppy, where you can see how I've used balance breaks in my training. So, I'll do that right after this podcast goes live.

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You might want to **count reinforcements or time between balance breaks**. So, it might be, I'm going to give two reinforcements and then I'm going to have a balance break or I'm going to give three reinforcements or whatever it is. Or you might say I'm going to do a balance break after 15 seconds, after 30 seconds.

You know I— really, you shouldn't be going longer than a minute, depending on what you're working on. But if you're working with a new dog, a new puppy, Holy smokes guys, those balance breaks, they should be happening more often than the training really because it's all about building relationship. And if you've got a new dog balance breaks are the way it is.

So, it might be like for me, 10 or 15 seconds of training, and then some intense balance break that you know, if it's a new puppy, it would just be like a little tug session, but that tug session might last longer than the training session. Then we'll go back to training. And then I gradually might build that up to 30 or 40 seconds with the puppy, but that's a really good ratio for new dogs, new rescue dogs, or new puppies.



Why Balance Breaks Fast Track Your Dog Training

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Number three rule, **you have to be sincere**. You really truly have to be enjoying what you're doing. You're saying to your dog, "Here's, we're doing this, we're having fun. We're in this together. This is so much fun." You can't be looking at the clock and going "Ah, I got so much to do. Oh, I'm just making a mess of this."

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So, you've got to be sincere. Number four **be intentional** about this. Plan out what your balance breaks will be. So, I have a couple of toys that I'll use. I might use a smaller toy to retrieve. I might use a different toy to tug. I might even use hand targets and run away or just chase me games as my balance break, but I've got those planned before my session begins. They are all part of— remember way back at the beginning of this podcast, those five steps to an amazing training experience. Step number one was have a plan.

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So, and that plan is included how I'm going to use my balance breaks. So, there you have it, why you should be using balance breaks, what the rules are and how it's going to absolutely, exponentially change your dog training. It's about being intentional. It's not just about, "Oh, we've trained long enough. We're going to have a game of tug." Intentional breaks in your training that allow your dog to get out of their thinking brain, get into just an instinctive prey driven, have fun, isn't this a great old time.

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And then you get back into your training. It is going to change your relationship with your dog. It's going to change your dog's relationship with training. Trust me on this. I'd love to hear from you. Let me know if you're doing balance breaks. If you've been using them correctly, maybe you didn't, you were doing something similar, but you're going to get more intentional.

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Please leave me a comment. Let me know what you think about it. And finally, I would love, love it if you would share this podcast with your friends, share it on social media, get on the phone and say, "Hey, have you heard Susan Garrett's Shaped by Dog?" I would most appreciate that. And of course, if you're watching this on YouTube hit that like button. I'll see you next time on Shaped by Dog.

Resources:

[Blog Post: The Secret Sauce For Enthusiasm ... Balance Breaks!](#)

[Podcast Episode 6: The Art of Manipulation](#)

[Blog Post: Planning for a Successful Shaping Session with Your Dog](#)

[Blog Post: Got D.A.S.H. \(Desire, Accuracy, Speed and Habitat\)?](#)

[Podcast Episode 35: Pro Dog Training Tip to Improve Your Dog's Focus](#)



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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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