



Episode: #64

Help! How Can I Tell My Dog He's Wrong?

Speaker Key

SG Susan Garrett

Transcript

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SG Because you've tuned into this podcast, there's a very good chance you believe like me that our dogs are doing the best they can with the education we've provided them in the environment that we put them in. And if you were like me, that means success in dog training comes down to really three things.

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It's number one, the reinforcement that we're using. Number two, the plan we have laid out for our training and finally the environment that we're training the dog in at that time. Hi, I'm Susan Garrett. Welcome to Shaped by Dog. If you're watching this on YouTube, go ahead smash that like button right now.

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I promise you it's going to be worth it. Because today we're talking about what happens when things don't go as planned. When we aren't having success. When our dogs do make wrong choices. What are our options then? Hmm. The way I see it, there's really four things that are commonly done when the dog makes a mistake.

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I think two of them are more reflexive and two of them are really intentional. So, let's think about when you're training your dog for example. What is your emotional state when things are going well? You're happy, you're confident, everything's you know, chucking along. And what about when your dog makes a mistake?

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Well, you might be cool about it. But what if your dog continues to make a mistake, or the mistake they make is like, you know, horrific? You might start getting frustrated. You might even start getting angry. And your emotional state dictates a lot what you do when your dog does something that you don't think they should be doing. Because when you don't think they should be doing, it ends up being a bit of a disappointment to you.

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So those four things that I talked about. When we're training our dogs, let's say I'm shaping my— you can see my puppy if you're watching this on YouTube, chances are you can see my soon to be six-month-old puppy running around in behind here. And if I'm training her, so this afternoon I took her out to the building, and I was doing some shaping of getting up onto her hot zone from different distances.

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And when I'm doing that, if she chooses incorrectly what I do is method number one, when your dog doesn't do something you want, I just withhold the reinforcement. I just don't give them the cookie. Don't give her the cookie. And she goes, "Oh, yeah. Okay." And jumps onto the bed. That little pause, little lack of reinforcement is feedback to her.



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So that's method number one for what you can do. Now, let that always comes back to those three things that I said are really are what leads us to success. Number one, having a really clear plan. So, if you hire somebody to build you a house and you're building your dream house and you've given them several hundreds of thousands of dollars and they come up with this, you know, seven-page blueprint that's been approved by the city and they say, "This is what we're doing. We're starting construction tomorrow." You've got a lot of confidence in that. Right. You know that plan is going to lead to what your dream house should be.

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And then they say, "By the way, we've built this exact same house with three other people. So, this time it should be a breeze." "Wow. That's great." As opposed to the fellow that you hired and you've given them all this money for your dream home and they come up with a napkin with some things drawn on it and some scribbles and some arrows and they say, "Yeah, we're about to start construction. We're ready to go." Uh, yeah, the confidence is not quite there. And chances are that plan is not going to work out as well as the first one.

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So, the plan ideally is something that has happened in the past that has been repeated with dogs in the past. It's clear, it's concise, it's split things down into achievable results for the dog. That's the plan. The value, as I talked about in [episode number 59](#), you need to have a ranking of value and know what you're training that the value is appropriate for the dog and the stage that you're training. And then the environment. You need to manipulate the environment. And I talked about that in [episode number 6](#).

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So, if you've manipulated the environment so that the obvious, the right choice is the obvious choice, you've got high values to a reward to reinforce your dog and you've got that clear plan, success is inevitable. And so, if the dog makes a mistake, there's very limited choices for them because you've manipulated the environment that the obvious choice is clear because of the way you've manipulated the environment. You're using high value rewards.

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So just withholding that reinforcement, boom, they go (light bulb), "I got it." And they go right back to work. Now so that's one thing you can do when your dog chooses incorrectly. Another thing you can do, it's something that's called a [non reward marker](#). And a non reward marker means a lot of things to a lot of different people.

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It's something that I use, but that if I was raising a dog just to be a family pet, I could probably get through all the behaviors I ever wanted to train and never use a non reward marker. So, a non reward marker is used when not using it, the dog would keep working thinking they're going to get something.

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All right, I'll give you an example. Let's say I was going to give you a say, I'll give you a thousand dollars to deliver this package to the post office in Hamilton. Now I live 18 kilometers from the city of Hamilton. Thousand dollars, well that's high value reward. Okay, I've got that package. And I say, I'm going to deposit that thousand dollars into your bank account when you arrive.



Help! How Can I Tell My Dog He's Wrong?

00:06:07

I'm going to watch you on a GPS tracking monitor. So, I see the monitor, I see them get in the car, I see them drive and I see them drive by the turn off to Hamilton. And they keep driving and they keep driving. They go by Toronto, they're into Quebec, they're going across Canada now. They're now close to 1800 kilometers and they pull into a town called Hamilton, Prince Edward Island. I didn't even know it existed.

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And then they call me up. "Yeah, no, you missed the turnoff." So, if I was training my dog to do something where if I didn't stop them, they would continue on thinking they were correct. It's really kinder to let them know that's incorrect. So, an example would be when I'm training my dogs in agility to weave 12 poles, and this would be not at the beginning. This would be, you know, down the trot a little bit where they— if they missed the entry, if I didn't tell them they missed the entry, then they would keep weaving and at the end they get off and they'd go, "Okay. I'm in Hamilton. Where's my reward? I've weaved those 12 poles, where—?" "Well, you made a mistake at pole number two."

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So, do you see how that could be confusing and conflicting to your dog? So, a non reward marker. The key is it's unemotional. It's a word like I use the word, "Oops." Some people say, "try again" or "wrong". And it's only used when what you're teaching is a behavior chain. When if you don't tell the dog, if you don't give them that feedback, they're going to carry on and think they are correct.

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All right. The challenge with non reward markers is they're way overused. People use them when they're shaping. They shouldn't be used when you're value building. When you're initially, like what I was doing with my puppy, getting her to go a longer distance to a bed, that's value building.

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I would never use a non reward marker there. That I would withhold reinforcement, or I would look at my role. Have I manipulated the environment well enough to get, to make the correct choice the obvious one? So, a non reward marker should not be used with puppies. It should not be used in a simple shaping or value building session.

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The challenge with non reward markers is they often are overused, incorrectly used, and they morph into the second way to tell a dog that they are wrong. The third way and the fourth way— so we have withholding reinforcement, we have a non reward marker. The third and fourth way, those two are what I call more unconscious reactive. Most often they are not planned.

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Non reward markers are conscious. I'm making a choice, withholding reinforcement, I'm making a choice. So, the third way of telling a dog they are incorrect is what I call a mild verbal punisher. And these aren't planned on my part. My dog tells me that I'm using them. So those are things when I might say things like, "That's enough" or "Cut it out." I might say "Seriously?" "Oh, my!" is another one I'll use. So, it's a mild verbal punisher. Now the non reward marker, the way we train it, it really isn't a punisher because it's trained like a recall.



Help! How Can I Tell My Dog He's Wrong?

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The dogs hear it, and they go, "Okay, I'm coming right back and I'm getting ready to try it again so I can get my reinforcement." The number three category, the mild verbal punisher, you could tell by the dog's reaction, they don't expect to reinforce her. Like they stopped. Sometimes maybe they append their ears. You look at their TEMP, right? Going back to [episode number 4](#) here on Shaped by Dog. You look at the dog's behavior. And do they pin their ears? Do they tuck their tail a little bit?

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Now with my dogs, they just kind of look at me like, "Oh yeah." And the mild verbal punisher is said, you know, kind of sometimes I do it laughing. "Haha! Oh my." But it's not said in a rage. It's just "Oh..." like, "Yeah, this isn't gonna work for me." Okay. Now those mild verbal punishers honestly are things that I use around the house. But the mild verbal punishers are telling you, you have failed as a dog owner. You have failed as a dog trainer.

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You are frustrated because you didn't set up the environment for your dog to be successful. Maybe you gave your puppy too much freedom while you were recording a podcast and they did something naughty. Not the case. She's just lying right here beside me. That's what she's doing. So, the mild verbal punishers, they happen because we're human. And a lot of times they're unconscious. A lot of times, it's just the way you sigh *sigh*. But for some dogs, they're sensitive and they go, "Oh my bad, what have I done?"

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And what happens is that sometimes that mild verbal punisher goes into category number four. And that is an intimidating verbal or physical punisher. Those are things like, "No!" "Hey, no!" "Ah-ah!" "Knock it off!" And they could be followed up by taking the dog roughly or whatever, it could escalate. Both category number three, the mild verbal punisher and the intimidating verbal or physical punisher are signs you're frustrated. And what my mentor Bob Bailey says is when things don't go right in training, what do we do is 'bang head here', meaning go bang your head because you have failed your dog.

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Now, the first thing I do is I need to stop any reinforcement that the dog is getting. Now, are there times when I would use an intimidating verbal punisher, like I wouldn't use a physical one, but I have used an intimidating verbal punisher when my dogs are doing something that could end their life. Like if I see that they are chewing on an electrical cord. I might give the old "Hey!" to scare them, to get them away from that. It's rare. And it's when I have really, you know, made a mess of my dog ownership abilities that I set my, I allowed my dogs or my puppies to get into that kind of situation.

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When I use words and I just, you're always evaluating your dog's response to what you're doing. Your dog, shaped by dog, your dog is telling you when you screwed up as a human. Their emotional response is giving you a big hint that you didn't set them up for success. That your expectations are here but your, the way you've trained them is down here. And so, you have no right to be angry. And you know what, like I said we're humans cut yourself some slack, we get frustrated, but promise your dog you'll do better next time. That you're going to set them up for success. That you're going to look at the environment that you've left them in, or you're going to look at the plan you have for your training.



Help! How Can I Tell My Dog He's Wrong?

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Now, a couple of episodes ago, I talked about teaching a dog [to touch their nose to a target](#). A target stick. So, this is something that I use a lot to teach a dog simple behaviors like sit or down or crawl. I might use it, I use it in my cooperative care, my cooperative health with my dogs where I'm cutting their nails or I'm brushing their teeth. I used the target stick for that.

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Now think about, we want our dogs to touch their nose to a stick. What can go wrong with that? Well, first of all, if we haven't created an environment that's free of a distraction, the dog could completely ignore it. "Yeah. There's stuff going on around there." Or the dog might start sniffing. "I don't see any value in that. I'm going to start sniffing the floor." Or they might just leave, or they might go, "Oh, what's that?" And they start biting at it or they paw at it. All these things, you have to in effect, as a trainer end up punishing the dog. Withholding reinforcement long enough is a form of punishment.

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Me telling the person who carried that package to me to the post office in Hamilton 1800 kilometers away without giving them any feedback that they're wrong. That's in effect, punishing them, right? You're not getting that reinforcement. I'm withholding it from you. Uh, you got to start it all over again.

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And so why would all of those things happen with the target stick? It would happen because you didn't have a great plan. And tomorrow or in the next couple of days, I'm actually going to post a video on my YouTube channel here that gives you the exact plan I use so you don't have those problems. The exact plan I use with my dogs and my students' dogs, how the step-by-step of how to write a dog training plan to create the behavior you want without all of the failures that the dogs are going to have.

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So, if you would like to watch that, come back to my YouTube channel, hit the subscribe button and the notification bell and we will let you know when that video gets posted. It's going to get posted in the next couple of days. Part one is already there if you go to our channel. When you get the environment, when you have that plan correct then you don't end up needing to use verbal punishers of any kind. And 99% of the time we'll never need a non reward marker. It's very unlikely you need a non reward marker. Unless you're doing something that is a behavior chain.

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But a lot of people say, "Well Susan, come on! Pfft, it's kind of benign right? Like just using a little mild punisher, like what's the big deal? It's, how does that hurt anything?" The dog, you know, so they might get a little frozen look, but they recover pretty quick and we keep moving along. Every time you train, every time you interact with your dog, you are building a relationship. So, you're building a relationship both with yourself and with the thing you're training.

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So, let's say I'm cutting my dog's nails. I am building a relationship with my dog to the nail cutting. If I, my dog pulls her paw away and I go, "Hey, hey! Knock it off. I'm cutting your nails here." Over time our dogs are going to learn to hate having their nails cut. Where if you do it in a cooperative way, when they're never wrong, then they learn to love having their nails cut. They can't wait to have their nails cut. So, every repetition builds a relationship.



Help! How Can I Tell My Dog He's Wrong?

00:16:42

Are you building a positive relationship with your dog or are you tearing down that relationship? I'll give you one example. Another example. Let's say I have five tennis balls on a table, and I want to shape you to pick up the— they're all different colors. I want to shape you to pick up the yellow one. And you go and you pick up the blue one. And I say, "Ah-ah, no." And then you put it down, you pick up the red, "Ah-ah, Ah-ah, no." You put it down and you keep going "Ah-ah. Ah-ah." until you get the yellow one. And you could say, "Well, Susan this isn't a big deal." Yeah, that was good. Good feedback.

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But if that is training every single time, then you go into training expecting to be told you're wrong, you're wrong, you're wrong, you're wrong. Now being told you're wrong by withholding reinforcement once in a while is not a bad thing, but going into training without relationship, that's not a good thing. Here's a different way with a better training plan for picking up that tennis ball. What if you came into room there was only one tennis ball on the table? It was a yellow one.

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And I didn't say anything, and I just shaped you went over you picked it up and I gave you, uh, I clicked and gave you an amazing vegan chocolate chip cookie with nuts. It would be amazing. And gluten-free of course. And that would be well, like great. It would be a small one of course, because we don't want you to get full on one cookie after you just one repetition.

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You put the ball back down or I might take the ball, put it back down and you pick it up again. After five or six reinforcements, you go, "I've got this!" Boom, pick it up, get a little vegan chocolate chip cookie. And then I might introduce a blue ball, but it would be at the far end of the table, the yellow ones closest to you so you might look at the blue, it's a little distraction in your environment, but you picked up the yellow. Bingo. You might get three chocolate chip cookies for that. Mmm. I want to be trained by me. Okay. I digress.

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And so, I'll carry on them. I put a red one and a green one on until I get all five balls on the table. But the four, I don't want you to pick up at the far end. And you now have had like a meal of these amazing chocolate chip cookies. And those ones are now distractions that you've learned to turn out. And now I bring them all together. Now, if you pick up a blue one now and you get no reinforcement, you would immediately put it back down and pick up the yellow one.

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"Whohoo! I know this game!" Do you see how easy success could be if you have great reinforcement? You've manipulated the environment for success, and you start with a really clear plan. When you do it right, it's so easy to be a success. We don't need to use any of the mild verbal punishers, as I said those things, they make us human, but I want every time for them to come out of your mouth the way they come out of my mind I go, "Sorry guys, my bad." How can I be better for my dogs? Non reward markers are things that, you know, they're just not needed for everyday, anytime that you're shaping a dog. With my own puppy, she actually would never need to know one at this stage unless as I'm training for agility, she will be introduced to one in a really positive way that for my dogs non reward markers, the word "oops" is super engaging.





Episode: #64

Help! How Can I Tell My Dog He's Wrong?

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It's a different way that we teach it for sure. And it never morphs into a verbal punisher, the way a lot of people they'll be shaping their dogs and they'll go "Wrong. Wrong. Wrong. Wrong. Wrong! Wrong!!" Because they're getting more frustrated because their dog isn't getting, because the plan was flawed to begin with.

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Do you see what I mean? So, focus on having that great plan, having great reinforcement, manipulating environment, and then you're going to have success. And you don't need to worry about how you have to tell your dog that they're wrong. Because it's going to be so aware that they are wrong. Hey, remember, check back on my YouTube page to see that training plan on how I train myself, how I train my dogs and my students' dogs on how to use the target stick in training.

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That's it for today. I'll see you next time on Shaped by Dog.

Resources:

[Podcast Episode 59: Why Your Treats Aren't Working for Your Dog](#)

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

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

[Video: Target Training for Dogs Part One](#)

[Blog Post: What IS Ideal Meaning of a NRM?](#)



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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