

# Episode: #94

## How the Best Professional Dog Trainers Use Reinforcement

### Speaker Key

SG Susan Garrett

### Transcript

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SG Have you ever watched a really well-trained dog, like a police dog, a high-level world champion agility dog, or a service dog, that seem to be working without getting any kind of food or toy reward from their handler. And especially if this is something that you've tried on your own and your dog says, "No, thank you. I'm opting out." Well, if you have, you are going to love today's podcast.

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Hi, I'm Susan Garrett. Welcome to Shaped by Dog. Today, I'm going to be talking about that mystery. Why it seems that some of the elite dogs work so brilliantly, and it doesn't look like they're getting reinforcement. The mystery is solved.

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This is going to be critically important to those of you who just have a new puppy or a new rescue dog. Of course, it's going to be critically important for those of you that are struggling with some challenge with your own dog that you just can't seem to fix. And I really want all of you who have been taught that you should be using food lures or toy lures to create behavior with your dog. I would like all of you to pay particular attention to today's podcast.

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I think this is going to be a pivotal podcast for many people. And let me tell you how it came about. Recently, I put up a post on social media where I shared that it isn't the food rewards that the best dog trainers in the world use that make them so great. It's how they use their food rewards. And there was a number of comments from people who said, "Well, the best dog trainers in the world shouldn't use food. The best dog trainers in the world don't use food or toys." And I recognized for the most part these were just trolls that were, you know, looking to try and stir some action.

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But what concerned me was that some of these posts actually got 30 or 50 people giving them a like or a thumbs up. And I thought, wow, there is some confusion here in how reinforcement is used because let me tell you, all reinforcement trainers are not the same. All reinforcement-based trainers do not use food in the same way. I'm going to share how things look different in today's podcast.

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Now, in response to that post, I decided I would invite a friend of mine, 46-year veteran of the Seattle police force and a phenomenal dog trainer who definitely uses food and toys in his training. I'd invite Steve White to join me for a discussion on the use of food in training at the elite level.

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And I'm going to share a link in the show notes so that you can [listen in to that conversation](#) that Steve and I had. I think you're going to find it a really interesting one. What all of us elite dog trainers understand is that dogs will work happily without the use of food or toys once you've been able to convince them that the work is the most reinforcing thing. Is that possible with all dogs of all breeds?



## Episode: #94

# How the Best Professional Dog Trainers Use Reinforcement

00:03:17

I believe it may be, but I do believe it's easier for some dogs. And I will share with you why later on today. For many dogs though, the work becomes massively valuable because the reinforcement has been stacked. And let me tell you when you look at an elite level dog and say, "Wow, they're working without food or toys." it's an illusion because what's happened is they will eventually get some reinforcement from their handler.

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It may be drawn out. It may not be happening, you know, in 32nd intervals. They've been trained to work for longer, but they still are getting a lot of reinforcement from the work they're doing. Because elite dog trainers understand that you stack reinforcement so that the highest reinforcement that you could ever give a dog and that could be different for any dog, that value can go into the lowest level reinforcement that you can give your dog.

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I talked about this in podcast [episode number 16](#) where I talked about the thing before the thing. So, if your dog gets on the counter and you tell them "Off" and they get off and you say, "good off" and give them a cookie you actually are teaching the dog you have to be bad in order to be good. That's stacking reinforcement, but that's stacking it in a way you really don't want to be doing it.

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Also, you might want to check out [episode number 80](#), where I talked about the different types of relationships because that is really what I'm talking about today. And the difference between dogs who seemingly work for food and dogs who seemingly work just for the love of what they're doing with their owner versus dogs who only worked for food or toys.

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That really is about the relationship that you have with your dog, and the relationship is built through the reinforcement we have, whether it's a relationship with a parent, a relationship with a child, your relationship with your partner, your spouse, relationship with your coworkers or your boss. All relationships are built through reinforcement or lack thereof. True story.

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So, let's talk about your dogs. There are [five categories of reinforcement](#) that I use with my dog. And it's really important that you start thinking about growing the different things you use to reinforce your dog. You don't want to get stuck on just one thing. Five categories. Number one, **attention**.

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That could be a look. I could look at my dog, and that will get their attention. They will instantly know I'm engaging with them. It could be the way I breathe. If I take a deep breath, that is a trigger for my dogs to know, "ooh, something's on." That is me giving them my attention.

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Attention could be something more obvious. It could be your patting or your praise, which are two separate things. They still fall under the category of attention. Attention could also be scolding. So, dogs who get scolded for barking. Quite often, that scolding is what's reinforcing the barking, so you get more attention barking. And sometimes, you're not quite aware of what you're doing.



## Episode: #94

# How the Best Professional Dog Trainers Use Reinforcement

00:06:22

So, category number one, attention. Category number two is **food**. So, there's the obvious all the different training treats that you could use. There's the food you deliver to give your dog their meals every day. How are you delivering it? What is that dog doing when you're delivering that food? Are they running in circles around you, barking, bouncing off of you?

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Are they growling at each other because they want their food first? The delivery of the food is rewarding all the things that are going on when you deliver that food. So, the third category is **cues** that your dog knows because you've built them through reinforcement. So, for example, if you ask your dog to come and they come running, and then you ask the dog to sit, the behavior of coming running gets rewarded by the sit.

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Now the sit could be rewarded with a toy or your praise or food, but that also reinforces the decision of the dog to come running. Cues are powerful reinforcers. There are things that we use at the highest level of sport all the time. Which is why when your dog is doing something naughty, and you say "off," you're actually rewarding them for what they're doing at the time you've given them that cue.

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So, we've got attention. We've got food. We've got known cues that you've built through reinforcement. The fourth category is **toys**. Now there could be toys that you throw like a flying disc or a ball or a favorite retrieve toy. They could be toys that you interact with in a way of a game of tug or a quick toss. Those are interactive toys.

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Now there's also toys that dogs are given that they run off and play with by themselves. I'm going to put an asterisk beside those toys because they really belong in my books in the fifth category. And that would be [activities that your dog finds reinforcing](#). Activities like the obvious things, like going for a walk or going for a car ride, going for a swim, chasing squirrels, chasing other dogs, barking, or aggressing at the fence with the other next door neighbor's dog.

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Playing sports. The different obstacles in dog agility are powerful reinforcers for my dogs. For many dogs, a tunnel. Going into a tunnel is the most reinforcing obstacle in agility. For my dog Momentum, she's crazy about a Seesaw, a big reinforcer. For dogs that do things like IPO or police work, the opportunity to bite a sleeve is massively reinforcing. And so that is probably the number one reinforcing thing that people who do those sports could ever give their dog.

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Now, all of these activities they start to work for you as a dog owner once you start to put permission before them. All of those activities without permission from you are reinforcement that's lost. Everything we give our dogs, we need to have it to come through us. When it doesn't come through us, what ends up happening is what I call a transactional relationship. A transactional relationship could happen between humans and humans and humans and animals. So, you know, a parent could say, "make your bed, and I'll give you a quarter." or the child says, "I'll make my bed if I get extra screen time on my iPad tonight." That's transactional.



## Episode: #94

# How the Best Professional Dog Trainers Use Reinforcement

00:09:59

So often, people starting out their dog training career will go to a school who will teach them to be transactional for their dog. The very first thing you'll be taught is how to put a cookie on your dog's nose to get them to sit or to down or to come with you or to walk beside you.

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So, you're teaching the dog 'do things before me when you see the big cookie.' And that's where people misunderstand, "how can I get my dog to not chase a cat? Because the cookie I've got doesn't have the value of the cat." Well, that's transactional thinking. And you're right; you will never get a dog to not chase the cat without using punishment of some kind if you have a transactional relationship.

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But you don't need to have a transactional relationship. You could have what I have, and that's a partnership with my dogs. It starts as soon as I get them home. I start to share with them how those, the category of five reinforcements, come through me based on decisions or choices those puppies make.

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So, am I going to praise my puppy? Unfortunately, a lot of people do this. When the puppy is running in the opposite direction with a toy, "come on. Good baby! Good baby! Bring me that. Good baby! Good baby!" Reinforcing through your praise, something you don't ever want to see repeated.

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What's really funny is that talking in that very high pitch praise just caused my puppy to come upstairs. It's very reinforcing. You need to think about all of the reinforcement you give your dogs. Whether it's praise or the attention, the food you give them, the cues you're giving them, the toys you decide to use, and of course, the activities that you allow them to engage with.

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Playing with another dog as a high reinforcer. I'll ask my puppy to sit or hand target or down before I say, "all right, go play." Because that's a massive reinforcer. Why just give it away. It's lost reinforcement. We need to make all of that reinforcement come through you, and that's how reinforcement-based training works.

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That's when a dog will stop chasing a cat because you've asked them, and it's not because they're saying, "well, she's got a meatball. I think I'm going to chase this cat." Because just think about it, imagine that you're sitting on your couch, and you see your dog and you start talking to them and patting them and you're praising them.

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And if you have more than one dog, if it's anything like my house, as soon as I start talking and patting and praising one dog then another dogs go, "yeah, I think it's me, me, me, me. No, no. Don't pat them. Pat me, me, me." Do you have that at your home? Because they all want your attention. "You're doling out attention; I'll take a little bit of that."



## Episode: #94

# How the Best Professional Dog Trainers Use Reinforcement

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Now while I'm giving everyone attention, imagine if in the backroom Kim takes the dog dishes from the draining rack and puts them on the counter because she's going to start dishing out food. Imagine how my audience of "I want your attention, Mama" goes to zero. Everyone goes, "oh well, your attention's awesome most of the time, but right now, there's a better reinforcer about to happen."

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And as Kim's doling out that food and about to give them their breakfast or dinner, they don't get lunch. What if I went to the door and said, "hey, who wants to go swimming?" Guess what? Four of my five dogs would say, "ah, we'll get breakfast later. We're going for a swim."

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Now with Tater Salad, the bulldog, I would have to say something like, "hey, who wants to chase this squirrel or chipmunk?" That would get him to leave. Do you see what I'm saying? There's a natural hierarchy for reinforcement with our dogs. We need to make sure that we expand our dog's reinforcement, have it all come through us so that even though they originally might've been a high value reward, the chance to work with you trumps all of it because it all has come through you.

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So how does this partnership work? Number one, you need to know what reinforces your dog and when what trumps something. And you need to work to change that. So, number one, what reinforces your dog in those five categories and grow each of those.

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Don't just say, "oh, my dog loves food." He'll just work for food or even you guys who are listening to this who have very high achieving elite dogs who say, "my dog just works for the bite." You've got to grow that. You've got to say, "you need to tug with this tug toy before I give you permission to go and do that bite work." That's how you build up the value for the tug.

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My Border Collies, once they get going in agility, they will happily never take another cookie or toy. They just want the chance to do agility. But if I am a reinforcement-based dog trainer, how am I ever going to fix a problem I have in agility if agility is a reinforcer? I have to keep that hierarchy of reinforcement high.

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So, if you want to do a Seesaw first, you have to tug with this. I know they won't take food, but they can tug. And I may have to get further away from the Seesaw before I get that tug, but I get it. And then I work in food the same way. Our goal here is to reverse our dog's reinforcement pyramid. Rather than having only one or two really high value rewards that the dog will go for, we want to have a multitude of high value rewards at the top and only a very small number of low value rewards at the bottom.

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And start stacking your hierarchy of reinforcement. So, know what food your dog loves. Know what food your dog won't take when and start building that. For example, a few weeks ago I was walking Tater Salad and Kim was with me and I play these games.



## Episode: #94

# How the Best Professional Dog Trainers Use Reinforcement

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I was showing her some of the games I play with him. And one time, I did a recall, he came barreling back expecting his cookie, but instead, I gave him a tug toy. And he went, "Ah, that's not our arrangement. Yeah, I don't tug with you when I come back; you give me a cookie." There's no way I, and I thought, "Well, just, if you could just pick it up, you don't need to actually have to tug." "Oh, nay nay, not our deal."

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And so, for the next two weeks, I took Tater out at dinner time, and I got him to retrieve different things all over the yard, different locations, but that's how he earned his dinner for two weeks. Now, there is no way he's going to say no to retrieving for me because I've taken the value of something that's super high mealtime, and I've put tug with me, and then you possibly might earn another scoop of your food. I might do two tugs. I might do three tugs. I might do four tugs. Now, of course, at first, I only wanted to get that little bit of a touch.

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So, know what your reinforcements are, know what your reinforcements aren't, work at growing what your dog won't take so that they'll take it at any time. And you're going to get there by stacking your reinforcements. So, you might smile at your dog, talk to them, pat them, and then play a game of tug. You might play a game of tug and then give them permission to go and play with another dog or go for a swim or do something else.

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Stack reinforcements. They all come through you. They all grow massive in value. And the final thing is pay attention to what you're rewarding when you're giving your dog your attention. Even if it's to say, "Hey, knock it off." You're rewarding something. Reinforcement is amazing. Reinforcement builds behavior, and it can build an amazing relationship with your dog, a relationship that becomes a partnership.

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And with a true partnership the work becomes intrinsically reinforcing for the animal. And that's exactly how it can happen for you and your dog if you're patient and you pay attention to the fine art of reinforcing your dog. I'll see you next time here on Shaped by Dog.

### Resources:

[YouTube Video with Susan Garrett and Steve White \(Two Dog Training Experts 70+ Years of Experience Talk Reinforcement\)](#)

[Podcast Episode 16: The Thing Before Your Dog's Thing](#)

[Podcast Episode 80: Does Your Dog Love You? Let's Talk Relationships](#)

[Podcast Episode 11: The Power of Permission in Dog Training](#)

[Podcast Episode 2: Reinforcement](#)



### 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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