

# When Reinforcement Based Dog Training Doesn't Work

### Speaker Key

SG Susan Garrett

### Transcript

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SG Reinforcement based dog training almost sounds too good to be true, doesn't it? You can have the dog of your dreams without ever physically correcting the dog, without ever yelling at the dog, without ever telling the dog "No!". Doesn't that sound amazing? But what happens when it doesn't work? What happens when you do all of that, and you end up living with a four-legged monster? What happens when reinforcement-based training doesn't work?

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Hi, I'm Susan Garrett. Welcome to Shaped by Dog. And today, I'd like to introduce you to one of my online students, Wendy, and her Soft-coated Wheaten Terrier, Rico. Now Wendy and Rico have been in my program, but recently she let me know she's really overwhelmed by Rico's behavior.

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Let me share with you what that looks like. And if you are listening to this podcast, you might want to jump over to YouTube when you get a chance, and you can actually see Rico. You could see Rico trampolining on all of their furniture. When Rico steals something from the counter, like a dish towel or a pair of sunglasses, or any item he can reach, he then starts to play zoomies. And if by chance Wendy can catch 11-month-old Rico and get this item from him, it's not without Rico lunging and trying to bite her while she's trying to get the item, and then Rico chases her down, trying to bite and lunge to get it back.

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Now that kind of sounds like a four-legged monster, right? But let me remind you that I believe that our dogs are always doing the best they can with the education we've given them in the environment that we're asking them to work. And so, I don't believe dogs are monsters. I believe dogs are a reflection of what we understand about dog training.

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So, this podcast is to help Rico have the best life possible and help Wendy and her family live in harmony with Rico. Reinforcement-based dog training really gets a bad rap in a lot of circles. There are a lot of dog trainers with a much bigger following than I have here on YouTube or online who will tell you reinforcement is not going to stop behavior. And you have to punish a dog like Rico.

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And I can't argue with the fact that reinforcement can't stop behavior, only punishment can do that, but I will argue with the fact that reinforcement-based training won't work for a dog like Rico. It all comes down to this one line that I coined back in 1996, and it's this, "Positive is not permissive."

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When you're trying to be a reinforcement-based dog trainer and we use the word positive, which I recognize is not really positive, but it's the catchphrase of a positive dog trainer. You think, "Well, I've got to let my dog have his own way, and he can always do whatever he wants."



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“And I’m never going to say no. And I’m going to have a dog who is, you know, he’ll just figure it out because he’ll learn to love me because I’m giving them all this positive reinforcement.” Oh, nay nay. To quote John Pinette, “Oh, nay nay.” Dogs learn through reinforcement. And while you’re trying to be their best friend and give them everything that they desire, they are learning what they desire is what they can get. It’s not going to work. You’re both going to be really frustrated.

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When I say positive is not permissive, what I mean is a dog needs clarity. To quote Brené Brown, “Clear is kind.” A dog needs [clear boundaries](#) to understand what is possible and what isn’t. And let me tell you, a dog like Rico, he’s got clear boundaries. They’re super clear to him. They’re just not very clear to Wendy and her family. So, the first thing I asked of Wendy is that Rico needs some sort of confinement.

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I would suggest an ex-pen, and she said, “I tried that, and he just gets out of them.” Now I recommend for dogs who have learned to escape from ex-pens that you use an ex-pen with a lid, and you can actually make a makeshift lid yourself by getting pieces of PVC and just putting them where the two panels come together on the long sides of your ex-pen.

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So that those panels can’t bend, and then you need to put a lid on top of that ex-pen. But that dog still needs some supervision. So, the next question I asked is, “Well, what about a crate? How often does Rico get put into a crate?” “Oh, well, he gets put in his crate at night. And when we first got him, he used to be able to chill in his crate for a couple of hours a day.”

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“But now not so much; he carries on quite a bit. Actually, when he was recently neutered, the Veterinarian said he barked and whined all day long. And so, with the pandemic and my husband wasn’t traveling as much, he didn’t like the whining. And so, we decided just to put Rico in the laundry room and just put like a gate across. And that’s good if we’re going to go out, but if we’re home, he doesn’t want to be in there. And so, we can’t have him really be confined.”

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That would be a little cray cray. Soft-coated Wheaten Terriers have a lot of energy. And it sounds like Wendy is exercising Rico because I did ask that, but you need a way that you can give them some downtime. You need to [create what I call a pause](#). More on that later. Back to Rico.

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My next question was, “Well, what about when you feed Rico? Where do you feed?” And she goes, “Oh yeah, I feed him in the laundry room in his crate.” Then I asked a question. I already predicted what I knew the answer would be. I said, “Is the crate door closed when you feed him?” And of course, the answer was no, because that would be confinement and that wouldn’t go over so swell with Rico and the way he wants to live his life.



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Now to Wendy's crate credit, what I love about Rico is you can tell there was so much joy in his life, which I love to see because that means that nobody has really been harsh to Rico.

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And personally, I just love to see that joy come out of the dog. But what I don't like is for anyone to be so indulgent with their dogs. I mean, it's like kids, you're that indulging. You're going to have some problems. So, then I asked Wendy to describe to me what life was like in the morning. And she said, "Well, we're in bed, and Rico is in his crate, and he lets us know when he needs to get up. And I get up, and I take him out to go to the bathroom."

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Now here's where things go terribly wrong for dog owners. Your puppy says, "I need to go out." You get up, and you take them out. What happens next? What many people will do is they then start their day, and Rico gets freedom. Or they feed Rico, and then they start the day. So, [Rico gets food and freedom](#). And so, it doesn't take a smart dog, and Soft-coated Wheaten Terriers are pretty smart dogs.

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It doesn't take a smart dog very long to learn 'my voice can create reinforcement.' My reinforcement is freedom. Now, remember Wendy said when they first got Rico, he would be happy to [chill in his crate](#) during the day for up to two hours, but that ended. And then she slipped in this little tidbit, "except if my husband and I aren't home and our son is home." Then he can put Rico in his gated community and go into his room, and Rico doesn't make a peep.

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Now, what's different about that? What's different is that Rico has learned his voice can get his freedom AKA has reinforcement from Wendy but hasn't learned that from her son. So, what we have to do is create a different world. We need to turn back the clock to the time when Rico was okay to chill in confinement.

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So how do we do that? We do that by creating that pause that I spoke about, and that pause is the dog looking around being in a confined area and going, "I guess we'll just chill." And that pause needs to start at just a second or two. So, there's three things we can do. We can put the dog in the crate, and we can let them cry it out.

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Eventually, he's going to bark and cry, and you're going to get a pause. That's not the approach I want you to take. Now punishment-based trainers will say, "Put the dog in a crate or in the laundry room, and you can create the pause by scaring the dog, banging on a wall or throwing something and saying, "Hey!" You will get a pause because the dog has suddenly now gone into self-protection.

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"What... is there an earthquake? What's going on?" And you get that pause, and then you can let the dog out. I'm not a big fan of either of those two options. You want to create a pause that you can feel good about. Let me just share with you what my morning routine looks like when I have a brand-new puppy and they whimper.



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Now, if you remember, in [episode number 26](#), I talked about how I get my puppies to sleep through the night. And it's a rule called 'don't wake the mama.'

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So, when my puppies stir in the morning, I get up. I take them out just like Wendy. And then what I do is I come back, and I put them back in the crate. So, in episode number 26 I shared with you, I'd wake up, I clip the leash on the puppy's collar. I don't say anything to them. If they're small enough, I'll carry them out. With Rico of course, you'll just walk him out on leash, not saying anything. And when he's gone to the bathroom, I will put him back in his crate in the bedroom, and I will go back to bed.

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And I'll go back to bed for like; I don't know, 30 seconds, 60 seconds, a couple minutes. Now, meanwhile, with Rico, we're not going to do this right away because there will be no pause. But with my puppy, they might stir and go, "Oh, okay, I guess I'll do what I was just doing, which was sleeping." Because they got zero reinforcement from me, I didn't talk to them. I didn't praise them for waking me up.

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I didn't praise them for having a pee because that's a behavior chain. You make noise, she wakes you up, you pee, she gives you lots of "koochy koochy aren't you a great puppy!" then maybe, you know, she'll love you up on the way into the crate. Puppy wakes me up. I get up, I let them pee. I put them in the crate, and even if it's my time to get up, I still go back to bed.

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I don't go back to sleep. I go back, and I lie down until that puppy settles. Now, after a couple of days at the most, my puppies stopped saying, "I have to get up and pee." Because really, they don't have to get up and pee, and so here is my routine. I get up at five o'clock in the morning or before. And if when I get up my puppy's stir, I will take them up, have them pee, put them back in their crate, go lie down on the bed for 60 seconds until they settle, and then I get up and I go about my morning routine.

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And somewhere between 6:30 and 7, now if it's a brand-new puppy, it might only be half an hour later. I will go back in the room, and I will then make my bed. And then I will take the puppy out, and we will go out, have another pee, and then I'll start my regular routine. I still won't feed that puppy. I don't feed my dogs on a regular basis. There are exceptions, but generally, they're fed around nine o'clock.

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So, they don't get out of bed before seven. They've learned this routine from the time they were young. There's a pause. The pause is two hours. I get up at five, they go, "have at it, girl!" and they know nothing exciting happens until seven. And so now my puppy sleeps loose in my room. She is the first dog in a very long, long time that I've allowed to sleep on the bed. That's a long story. But I put a blanket on my bed, and she can sleep on that bed if she chooses.



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At the foot of my bed are some crates. And I put her dog bed on the crates. And she does start in the dog bed, but she does end up on the bed. But here's what happens at about quarter to five every morning; she gets off my bed, and she snuggles herself into her own dog bed. Because she knows I'm getting up, and she also knows the day isn't going to start. So, no sense being in this bed when I'm not going to be there, she goes in her own bed. This is a routine she has started on her own because of my morning pause.

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And so, she goes back into her own bed. I do my morning routine, around seven o'clock, I come in, and I make the bed, and that is her trigger, 'life is about to begin; she's making her bed.' Now before I had a puppy, I would get up and make my bed right away. But now my bed gets made at seven. How are we going to create that pause in your dog? What we need to do is just create a pause any way we can.

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Enter what I introduced in my last podcast, [episode number 98](#), the word enterichment, the combination of what people might call enrichment and entertainment. So, what we're going to do is we're going to put Rico in his crate. And at first, you're just going to put them in there for a meal. [Put the food in, close the crate door and sit.](#)

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I'd give him between three and five minutes to at least initiate eating. If he eats, that's great. And when he's almost done, just a couple of snibblets left, we're going to then put our hand on the crate and open the door. And when he's done eating, we're going to play [Crate Games](#). So, step number one, you have to have [Crate Games](#).

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That's a big part of a dog being comfortable when they are in confinement. Confinement is such a horrible word. We really need to change that. When they're doing a long pause. And so, what I want to do in step one is just create that pause. And if they're eating, you open the crate door, and then you release them. The next meal, you're going to wait until you hear them licking their bowl before you start [Crate Games](#) and release them.

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Now, what happens if in the first three to five minutes Rico says, "This isn't the way it is. My door should be open. I can't eat." Not a big deal. You're going to take out the food. You're going to release them. And you're going to try this again at lunchtime. And then if he doesn't eat, you're going to try it again at suppertime.

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I will put an Asterix beside this; speak to your Veterinarian if you have a breed of dog that's prone to having a stomach flip, then you may not want to go a long duration without them eating. You can maybe do some training and hand-feed them but ideally, we want them to be hungry so that they will eat in their crate.





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If it doesn't work, you can just put some really attractive food in their bowl and do it that way because we're just training it. We want to create a pause. So, let's assume now your dog is eating with the door closed. You are going to get up and start walking around the crate. Start really, really close so the dog can always see you, but you're going to be moving. When you hear them start licking the bowl, you come in, and you release them. After three days of this, I want you now to be going near the far walls. You're no longer near the crate. You've weaned the dog off from needing to see you at the crate, but you're just walking around the room. You are now waiting. They've licked their bowl, wait for a momentary pause.

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You're still in the room. They're not likely going to start whining or barking. They're probably going to go, "Well, can't you see I'm done here. Like this is when you're going to let me out." We're just changing the routine. We want them to get used to 'there's a gate, and it's closing, and you got to chillax.' And so, we're going to go in, and we're going to open the door.

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And now we're going to move to the big stage where we're going to leave the room. So next meal, put the food in. You're going to walk around the room a little bit, and then you're going to go out of the room and come back in. And that's your new routine. Out and come back in. Out and come back in. The dog's finished; you're going to pause for maybe three seconds and then come back in.

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You're building up duration of your pause. Now go back to episode number 98 and the *enrichment* games that I said, I want you to start introducing them to your dog. The meatball game with the two dog dishes. It has to be introduced in a crate. We are starting to recreate value 'these fun games don't happen anywhere else, just in the crate'.

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Now, one of the things that I do with my dogs routinely, it starts when they're puppies. I start creating that pause right away. Let's say I'm going to work, well that's a bad example since I work at home. Let's say I used to go to work outside of the home. I would do my morning routine, and when I would put them in the crate, I would give them some easter biscuits and close the crate.

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The easter biscuits are just giving them some pieces of treats that scatter around their crate, and I close the door. And while they are searching for all of those treats, I'm gone. That pause is them being entertained. And by the time they finished two or three minutes of searching the crate, they go, "What was going on?" "I don't know. What am I supposed to do?"

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You create your own pause by tossing cookies in there. Somebody said to me one time, "Why are our dogs always barking and biting at the door when we put our dogs in the crate and yours don't?" and I'm like, "I don't know, my dogs are special. I don't know."



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And it was Lynda Orton-Hill, a good friend of mine, who noticed, you always give them some Easter biscuits. Create the pause. Create the pause by strategically building up that there's one second before you release the dog and grow that pause until the dog can handle being in the crate waiting for the bowl to be released.

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And then you're going to add *enrichment*, so that you create that pause that you can get away. Dogs need to learn that you're not always going to be in the same room. What happens when you go to a hotel room? Just like Rico at the Veterinarian, there was no pause for him. We need to create a pause so that our dogs can be comfortable and happy and we can go back to having clarity in your life.

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And once the dog understands, "I need to live in this environment and when I come out, I play these games that help strategically build up." Things like "bring that to my hand, I'm not going to chase you. And by the way, your feet shouldn't be on the counter."

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We need to get to that stage with strategic games, but we've got to start with a dog who is okay with being in confinement. And that is where you're going to start growing your pause. P A U S E, not the other paws. I'll see you next time on Shaped by Dog.

### Resources:

[Podcast Episode 27: Do Dogs Need Rules?](#)

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

[Podcast Episode 30: Why Dog Crates Are Not Dog Cages](#)

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

[Video Blog: Understanding Your Dog's Triggers](#)

[Crate Games Online](#)

[Podcast Episode 98: Puppy Home Alone: Are You Creating Chaos or Calm?](#)



# When Reinforcement Based Dog Training Doesn't Work

### 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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