

Why Isn't My Dog Learning What I'm Training?

Speaker Key

SG Susan Garrett

Transcript

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SG In any education process there's what the educator is teaching, and there's what the learner is learning. And anybody who's ever spent any time in an algebra class knows those two are often not the same thing. Hi, I'm Susan Garrett and welcome to Shaped by Dog. This concept is incredibly important for those of us who own and love and want well behaved dogs. Because in a classroom there is what the teacher is teaching, but there's other elements, like how much you apply yourself doing your homework or how well you pay attention in class.

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There's a lot of things that the teacher can put their hands on their hips and go "We took this, you should know this. We took this already." And let me just share with you that [as a dyslexic child](#), going through an education process, just because you thought you taught it, doesn't mean I was learning it sister. I can tell you that much for shizzle, but I digress.

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Let's talk dogs. Because with dogs there isn't any "did you do your homework?" or "did you pay attention?", it's all on us guys. It is a hundred percent on us. If there is a distance between what we thought we trained and what the dog is showing us they know, tie doesn't go to the runner here. It's all about what the dog is demonstrating.

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Because there's a flaw in the system, and today, I'm going to share with you how you can fix a big part of that flaw. It all comes down to something called a 'reinforcement process'. And there's six, well, five elements, sometimes six. It sounds like I don't know what I'm talking about. Trust me on this. I'll get to what that sixth element may be, but there's for sure five elements and sometimes six elements to the [reinforcement](#) process.

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And the vast majority of the people that I see with their dogs at the park walking down the street are messing this up. And honestly you can fix it. Just by listening to this podcast, trust me you can fix it. First let me share with you what the reinforcement process looks like. Now let's take an example like you can take anything you want to train your dog, but today we're going to talk about walking your dog down the street. Your goal is [loose leash walking](#).

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I want my dog to hang out at my side. They can be a little bit in front, a little bit ahead, I'm not going crazy, no one scoring us on this. But if I stop to cross the street, I'd like my dog to sit when I stop, and that's just safety. And when I say, let you know we're moving, then we're moving. That's all. No big deal. That's my goal. Now there is a reinforcement process. The first element is us observing what our dog is doing, because we want to catch your dog doing something amazing. Walking in the position they're supposed to be in, or sitting in the position they're supposed to be in. So, we're going to observe. Now our brain has to go scatter through all the data of what the dog is doing.



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And the second step is recognized. So, we're going to observe and recognize the thing that we really, really like. "Oh, that's good.", then we're going to mark it. We're going to acknowledge to the dog "Hey, I get, I'm picking up what you're putting down. I know what you're doing is good." So, we mark, it's the third element of the reinforcement process. And then we're going to deliver them a reinforcement, something they really like.

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Because sure it's good that we marked it, but then we follow it up with some positive reinforcement. Whoo-hoo! We're building the foundation of something very, very special here. Now we're going to place the reinforcement so that the dog can get it. It's no good that we've got it and we're delivering it, we've got to make sure the dog gets that.

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Now the sixth and sometimes element of this reinforcement process and that is something called the release. Which we only use if it's a control position like 'you sit and don't move', 'you lay down don't move', 'stand and don't move'. So, if it's something that we're asking the dog to not move, then they have to know when it's over. And that's where the release comes in. So, six elements, sometimes five, most of the time it's five, right?

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Observing, recognizing ding, ding, ding! That's the one I want, marking so that the dog knows that I know, delivering, and then the placement of where the final resting place is of that reinforcement and sometimes a release. Let's get back to walking down the street. So, here's what's happening.

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We're walking our cute little Goldendoodle, and the dog suddenly sees a squirrel and lurches over to the left and kind of pulls her shoulder out of the socket but immediately comes back in, "Oh, the squirrel is gone. It's okay." Comes back in beside you and our brain goes, "Oh look, they're right in, they were way at a position, but now they're right back in position. That's good. Let's uh, that's a ding, ding. We recognize it."

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So, we start to move our hand to get into our pocket, to get our cookie. And then as we're doing that, we mark it good. So, you could use a clicker for some things, like that's a marker. You could say "good dog". You could say "good". You could say "yes". I like the word good or yes, I'm using the word good more often now and that's the marker that tells the dog, "You know what I know. I'm being good here right beside me." So now you're getting in your pocket, you get your cookie out and then, "Oh man, that's a really big cookie."

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She breaks off a piece of it and put half of it back in and you take that out of your mouth. And then you're breaking it up and your dog's going, "What do you got in your mouth?" And he comes into position, and he comes out in front. He starts walking backwards as you're walking, he's out in front of you bouncing up and down. "Is that a good cookie?! Because I'm a good boy." And then you get it out of your mouth and you're breaking it up.



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And now he's jumping up on your chest and you go, "Yeah buddy! Yeah, you were good." And you give him a cookie because like his mouth is right here, the delivery and the placement can happen simultaneously. How good was that? And that's why dogs have a hard time learning what it is that we want. Now that's an exaggerated example. But what you want in a reward process is you want gaps that help build the behavior. Because the gaps between those five elements or six, that gaps are where behavior is lost.

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So, let's check this out. Let's look at that whole scenario again. You're walking down the street, your dog exits stage left gets to the end of your leash, which by the way is really not a good thing for your dog structurally. Something's going to hurt, I'm sure. And if you listen to [episode 16](#) here on Shaped by Dog, the thing before the thing, you've just created a lovely behavior chain.

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Because your dog was so far out of position that your brain went, ding, ding, ding, that's a jackpot when he immediately came crashing back beside you. And you're like "the difference between where he was and where he is now was so great! That has to be good." And so, you want to mark it, but before your mouth says anything, your arm starts to move for the cookie. To dogs they pick up on physical cues so much easier than verbal ones.

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And so, they don't even hear the word good. They just see the hand moving and they go, "Oh, I'm in." And they start moving out of position to follow where your hands going for the goods isn't it. But you mark and say good. And so, what you marked now isn't that dog who came crashing back into position, you marked the dog who was starting to move to follow your hand that they saw moving that was digging into your pocket.

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And so now the delivery happens, you've got the cookie out and you go, "Oh yeah, that's too big." and you have to break it up, that is a gap that allows behavior to be morphed. So now the dog puts their paws up on you "What do you got there?" And you're going "Well, I got to reward my dog for being good being at my side." And so, then you give them a cookie with their paws up on you, walking in the wrong direction as you're trying to go for a walk.

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None of that has anything to do with the dog walking on a loose leash. Again, an exaggerated example but parts of that happened every single day of the year. So, I'll give you an example. Somebody was in for a lesson and often a big complaint is her dog barks all the time. So, I'm observing her, as I do. I'm always working through this process of observing and recognizing and marking both with dogs and with students.

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And one of her big complaints is her dog just barks way too much. So, she gets a dog out of the crate sure enough on cue the dog spins and starts barking. So, she starts feeding it to get it to not bark. And so that she can start working. Reinforcement builds behavior. So, what did you just reward? Right, you know that would be a great tattoo. What did that cookie just reward? What did I just reward?



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A lot of times you aren't even being intentional. So, think about the dog lunge, they came back into position and be intentional. 'I want to mark that'. And dog training is a mechanical skill.

My mentor, Bob Bailey used to say that over and over again, 'dog training is a mechanical skill'. And so, what you were doing, you have to mark with your voice and then move. Be really intentional. Video your training. I know it's hard when you're walking down the street, but mark and then move.

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Now you're digging into the pocket. Now you've got these tidy tight little jeans on and that's hard to get those cookies out. And so, kangaroo pouches, that's a great place if you don't have a training pouch, but if you don't have a [training pouch](#), I can share with you one that I like. I've got a couple. I'll put some links in the show notes if you're watching this on YouTube, it'll be in the description.

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Your cookies are never broken up while you're training. Let's take an oath. Everyone put your hands up and if you're driving, keep one on the wheel. 'My cookies will always be broke up before I train.' Something simple I do, I'll get a roast throw it in the Instapot, cut it up, put it into little Tupperware containers, throw them in the freezer. Take one out for a week.

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Now, of course, I don't just train with roast beef. Those are my high value rewards. But I'll do the same thing with other things so that all of those training treats are cut up long before I need them. So, when you dig into your pocket, the more you break that up, the bigger the gap.

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Remember what happens? The gap between the elements of the reward process are what allows behavior to morph. We don't want behavior to morph. We want behavior to be clean. So, we mark "good". We reach into our bait pouch or wherever we have it, a kangaroo pouch. And now it's the delivery.

If when I reached to get a cookie, my dog comes in front, they're telling me the fundamental element of our dog training program ItsYerChoice is now a little blurry. So, I'll just take the cookies and I'll just put them in my hands and put them out in front of where you really want them. And the dog will then go, "Oh yeah right. I shouldn't be here, should I?" And they'll go back beside me.

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So, I'll put those cookies back in my pouch, pat the dog on the head, and try to rehearse bringing them out again. Will you stay in position? "Yeah, that's good." So, the delivery is about you reaching and moving the cookie to the dog, but the placement, the placement is gold. The placement of the reward of the reinforcement either builds or tears down the behavior you're trying to create.

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I can't tell you how many times I've seen people ask their dog to sit and when their dog sits, they say good, and they go to give them a cookie and the dog brings her paws off the ground, and they feed it. My friend Lynda Orton-Hill was over today so I asked her to be my demo of the bad dog trainer.



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And so, her and her dog, if you're watching this on YouTube, her and her dog are demonstrating some very bad positioning and bad reinforcement. It's all about the reinforcement process and understanding 'what did that cookie just reward? What was I rewarding?' And so, if you ask your dog to "down" and you go to give them the cookie and they lift up off their elbows to help facilitate you giving that cookie, the reward process is always in play.

The reinforcement process is always in play. You just reinforced for the dog that the down position is with or without the elbows on the ground.

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So constantly be aware of the gaps. The gaps between the observation and the recognition. You've got to be observing and recognizing that's the behavior I want, but if the behavior I want just came immediately before a behavior I do not want I am not going to mark that. I will observe it and see if I can get it for a few more steps and then I will say, "okay, that's good".

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Coming back after you chase something is great, holding position is really, really good. And so, the delivery has got to be swift and intentional at creating a reinforcement for the behavior you'd like to see repeated.

So, if I say good and my dog flips out in front, is it possible to teach loose leash walking like that? Eventually sure, but you're also reinforcing your dog for being in front, which is counter to loose leash walking. Because you can't walk with your dog in front of you. You're going to trip. It's dangerous. It's a hazard. Let's not do that.

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So, reinforcement needs to be on the side. It's all about what is it we want our dog to learn. The five elements or six sometimes in this reinforcement process, getting those gaps and minimizing them. And how do we minimize them? With really good training mechanics. Being prepared, being intentional and creating the behaviors that you want your dog to do. Now, it could be something as simple as asking your dog to go in their Hot Zone or go "hop it up" somewhere.

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If they go partway and they come back or they go partway and they spin and then you say, "No, no, no. I did say go in your Hot Zone." You now have built in a gap in that behavior. The behavior isn't go over and hop it up in your bed, the behavior is go partway and see if I really mean it. The behavior is go partway because going in the bed is getting further away from the big human Pez dispenser that holds all the cookies.

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And I don't really want to be far away from you because you got all the cookies. This bed, no cookies over here. We want to make sure that the placement of the reinforcement in that case isn't with the dog coming off the bed. I would throw cookies to the dogs, so they land in the bed. So, the dog learns "Oh, if you asked me to go on the bed and I get in the bed, I'll get cookies. "The Pez dispenser can throw now." You guys, I hope everyone listening to me really knows what a Pez dispenser is. It's a candy dispenser. It would be even more awesome if it was vegan chocolate chip cookie dispenser, but I digress.





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That's it. Reinforcement process, be intentional. I promise you that you will be tightening that distance between what you think you are training, and what your dog is learning. That will become closer and closer when you become really intentional about that reinforcement process. And in the meantime, remember, it doesn't matter what you think you're teaching.

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The only thing that's important is what that dog is demonstrating what they're learning. Because just like me taking that algebra class, 'I don't care what you taught, this is what I've learned'. Dogs reflect even better than I did as an eight-year-old. I'll see you next time here on Shaped by Dog.

Resources:

[Podcast Episode 50: Can Your Worst Challenge Make You a Better Dog Trainer?](#)

[Podcast Episode 2: Reinforcement](#)

[Podcast Episode 53: Stop Your Dog Pulling on Leash and Start Walking Together](#)

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

[Training Pouches / Treat Bags](#)



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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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