

Speaker Key

SG Susan Garrett

Transcript

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SG Imagine if you and your BFF both got litter mates. And you both trained for exactly the same amount of time every week. You used exactly the same training treats and you followed exactly the same training plan but after six months your BFF's puppy is amazingly well-trained, and your puppy leaves a little bit to be desired. And you think, "Wow, I kind of got the dud of the litter." That may not be the case because let's face it, there are no duds.

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Hi, I'm Susan Garrett. Welcome to Shaped by Dog. And today, when I was talking about this podcast, I was discussing it with Kim who's a brilliant dog trainer who works here at DogsThat. And I said, how can I get people excited about this concept? And she said, "You can't. Because dog owners don't care. But what they will care about is the outcome the concept is going to give them." And I'm like, "Yeah!" And so that is why you've got to be listening to this podcast and paying close attention and get yourself a pen and a paper. Because what I'm talking about is something that I call average or better.

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You know B.F. Skinner he wasn't kidding when he proved that [reinforcement builds behavior](#). So, the things that we reinforce grow. They grow in intensity and frequency. And so, when we are rewarding our dogs and without any clear criteria, we can't be sure what's growing. Back when I was a kid there was something called Pez dispensers.

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I don't know if they're still around, but I got to tell you I had Pez dispenser and I wanted a Goofy Pez dispenser. But being in a large family with a father who was a steelworker, not a lot of money to go around so Susan didn't get a Pez dispenser. They were the candy machines, right? Like you hold them in your hand, and you lift Goofy's hat, and the little candy comes out and you could just keep you know, popping out candies left, right, and center. And that's what I see with a lot of brand-new puppy and dog owners.

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They, and their heart, their earnest, they want to do the best for their puppy. They want to not have to correct their puppy. They want to use reinforcement to build this amazing relationship with them. And so, they're just doling out the candies or they're just doling out the rewards like they were a human Pez dispenser. But you've got to consider, what are you rewarding? And that's a line I want you to keep to your, keep asking yourself over and over again. What did that cookie just reinforce? Or what did that toy just reinforced? Or what did the [permission](#) to leave just reinforced? Because those things all are reinforcing something.

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And if you are really focused on what you're reinforcing by being aware of what is your dog's average, then you and your BFF are both going to have amazingly well-trained dogs. Think about this. Every behavior our dogs know, every behavior that we've taught them, there are [rules that guideline that behavior](#).



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So, when you say sit, you don't expect your dog to lie on the ground. You expect their butt to hit the ground and they should be in a sitting position. That's a simple and a gross expectation, but every behavior has criteria. And whether you're aware of it or not, the dog is aware of your criteria. The dog knows 'what do I have to do to get a reinforcement when they ask this?'

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So, something [as simple as a sit](#). Think about it, there is how fast we ask them. So, does your dog when you ask them to sit, do they hit the deck? "Oh yeah. Oh yeah. Yeah. We're going to do something. She asked me to sit." Or do they look around, see what the other dogs are doing, maybe scratch and then slowly ease their butt to the ground. "Oh. Wait, where's my cookie?"

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So, speed of how your dog sits is getting reinforced every time you give a cookie. Also, the tidiness, you think of a lot of puppies will do what we call a 'puppy sit' with a roll on one hip or the flop out their back leg. And they you know, their front legs might be going this way, but their back legs are heading in a completely different direction because they don't really care what they're sitting like.

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So how tidy does your dog sit when you ask? And guess what, this is functional. This is something that even though "Oh Susan, I'm not going to get too crazy about it.", like a dog sitting with their hock's flat on the ground and their hips on top of their hocks, that is functional. It helps to build correctness. And actually, if you aren't careful, you could create a dysfunction and imbalance in the way the dog grows. So, you want to be aware of how that dog is sitting.

So, we have the speed. We have the tidiness or the position. We have, does the butt hit the floor? Because that's a criteria. When I say sit your butt should hit the floor.

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Now some dogs, especially if they're really excited, they might like hover. "Okay. You're just about to, oh, like I'm kind of sitting down, just let me go get my ball." And they'll hover. Is that your criteria? Is hovering your criteria? Because your dog will give you more and more hovering if you are rewarding them by releasing them and letting them go get their ball.

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So, what is the criteria with your dog's butt? What about the pause? Do they hold still? If they're a Border Collie, can they be split well so that they can look at you? Are they moving all around? Or should they be still? For my dogs, sit means hold your paws still in front. Now with many dogs, there's something called cheap behaviors.

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So, a cheap behavior is something the dog does because maybe they're excited or it's just been built in. So, you ask your dog to sit, they bark at you and then they sit. You ask her dog to sit, and they might spin in a circle and then sit. You ask your dog to sit, and they bounce off. They maybe give you a little nip and then sit.

All of those behaviors get built in, to the behavior sit by the reinforcement that you're giving the dog after you cue them. So, are there cheap behaviors built into that?



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And then also does the dog wait for a release? Or do they go, "Oh, you asked me to sit. Okay that's good enough. I'm leaving now." The most important thing is, will your dog do this on one cue? Or do you have to like *sigh* take a big sigh and put your hands on your hip and kind of stamp your foot and twist your head and say it in a different tone, "Siiit!!" or grit your teeth "I said sit!" All of that is you helping, which gets built into the criteria for the dog.

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"When she says sit in a happy kind of Mary Poppins way, she doesn't really mean it and I can go about my business. But as soon as she gets that look, okay. Maybe I better pay it a little more attention." So, you with your reinforcement, with your help, you are building the behavior that the dog knows as sit. Now that is one behavior. Think of all the behaviors your dog has, right? They have down and sit is not down. It's not sit-down. It's sit or it's down.

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Walking on leash has criteria. So, when you move forward with your dog, they're getting reinforcement. So, you are reinforcing, they're pulling on leash and you're moving forward then your criteria is you can pull on leash that's part of my reinforcement. Average or better means you are going to be aware. And I would strongly recommend you video and journal.

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You are aware what is your dog's average and remember the mantra. Our dogs are always doing the best they can with the education we've given them in the environment we're asking them to perform. So, guess what, average or better is going to change.

So, when you ask your dog to sit in the kitchen as you're opening a cheese stick, the quickness, the positioning, the intensity for you is going to be a little bit different than when you're at the park and you're in front of the pond and you are asking the dog to sit before you let them go in for a swim.

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They might be so focused on that. That's when you're going to get more butt hovering, or they might kind of like just give a little bob. "Um, so yeah, I really want to swim, and you asked me to do something, so I'm just going to pause and look at you like and vibrate. Whooo I'm swimming!" And then if you go, "Well, you know what, you're not pulling on leash, then I'll let you go." That's your average or better. Average or better [changes in environments](#). And you need to be aware of that.

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And you need to say, "No, buddy. This is what I need from you." So, let's start with a quiet room and this is your little task I want you to ask your dog to sit in five different rooms of your house. And be aware of what's important to you. So, the seven criteria that I spoke about, or the eight criteria don't have to be yours. You might be happy to ask them to sit three or four times. I strongly encourage you not to. You might be okay with the Border Collie splitting their legs, and that's fine.

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Mine doesn't have to be yours, but yours has to be consistently yours because here's the kicker. Our dogs can only perform as consistently as our criteria dictates. So, our dogs are never going to get any better or any more consistent with their behaviors than we are. And here's what the dog does.



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They know “Oh, uh, in this environment I actually don't have to sit. I just have to kind of pretend sit and it'll get what I want.” And that's fine. “Okay. I've got different criteria here than I do at the house in the kitchen, different criteria. I'm good with that.” You don't have to be good with that, but what you have to do is while you're deciding I'm going to change my average or better you're going to be strategic. So first of all, we're going to do the test. Five quiet rooms, no distractions. And you're going to take a note of how fast did the dog sit.

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When you ask them to sit in Reinforcement Zone, which is right at your hip, did they spin out to look at your face? That's important because he might go, “Oh, where's the cookies? I want to spin up.” “No. I asked you to sit. You should be sitting where I asked you.” Or if the dog is roaming around the room and you ask them to sit. Creeping towards me, isn't sitting. My criteria is I said sit, I'd like you to sit. So, five different rooms.

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I want you to ask your dog a number of times, a minimum of two times in each room to get an average or better in a quiet room. Decide what your criteria. What you've got, because you've got to trust your dog. Your dog will tell you exactly what the criteria is. So, if you're getting that flicking or spinning out to look at the cookies, if you're getting the paddling, if you're getting the spin before they go, your dog's telling you, you just now have your eyes open to what you've been reinforcing.

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But I got to tell you, we are going to fix it because what we're going to do now is we're going to eliminate all the Pez dispenser cookies. We're going to eliminate all of the ‘here's a cookie because you're cute’. We're going to eliminate all of the cookies for nothing. Because dogs don't understand ‘good try’. You can't say, “Oh, you did try to sit so I'm going to give you a reward.” But they don't understand ‘good try’.

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They understand reinforcement. And so, you know what your dog's average is in a quiet environment and if you ask them to sit and they don't give you their average or better, then you're going to give them maybe a pat on the head and then a release, or maybe just a release and go to a different spot in the room and ask again. And see when they give you a better performance then you reward it.

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But it's important guys, you might have three criteria. You might have three criterions. You might have a single criterion or multiple criteria. You might say “Oh, uh, well that was fast. So, I'm going to give you a cookie, but it was also sloppy.” You've got to know we're working on fast, but the cookie is still feeding the sloppy.

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So, what you might want to do is get a plank. I love teaching sits on a plank because the plank will help the dog get their butt, their legs under their hocks so I get a tidy sit. I don't have to worry about sloppy. You can only select one criterion at a time. Your dog, if you say sit and your dog sits fast but they're sloppy you can't go “Well, you were fast but now you're sloppy.” No, because you're going to frustrate the dog and they're just going to stop playing your game. One criterion at a time.



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So, if you have five things, I would try to manipulate the environment like a plank to get the things that you don't want. So, if the dog is used to spinning, maybe have them on a leash. Have them come in beside you in the wall. Ways that they will choose to not spin so that you can reward fast. Then you can move them a little bit away from the wall. If they spin, they don't get a reinforcement, move them closer to the wall and then you can reward fast again.

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You pick one part, one criterion at a time. And you might say, "Well in this session I'm going to reward fast and then you're going to break it off and play the game of tug. And now I'm going to help you understand that I want you to sit tidy." One criterion at a time. And when you do that, you're not going to reward good tries anymore.

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You're not going to get nervous and go, "Oh, Susan said, you know, I'm not getting enough cookies. I've got to start upping the rate of reinforcement." No, every reinforcement you're going to say in your mind, when you're looking at your videos, "I knew what that reward was for." And if you can't name it, then you've just rewarded your dog like a Pez dispenser.

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And if you can't name what you just were awarded chances are your dog can't either. So, you're going to get the average or better in a private room. But that's not going to be your average when you're out in your backyard. So, what's your average at your backyard? And that's going to be different when you're at the pond.

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So, I'm not saying that you accept your dog's hovering butt at the pond, what I would say is my dog can't sit when they're one foot away from the pond. So, what I might do is ask them to sit 20 feet away. And then release them from there rather than having them come closer, not getting the behavior I want and then rewarding less than average.

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I'll tell you what, when I'm really focused on improving a behavior, I might only reward average like one in three. I want you to be slightly better than average. And when I get something that's a lot better than average then you know, give them a big reward and we'll have a big game.

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Average or better will be your guide and that's what's going to get your puppy's behavior every bit as good as your BFF's puppy's behavior. Because you are now going to be taking a journal along with your training, looking at your videos. I have [podcast episode number 133](#).

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I talked about how the video your training that allows you to become your best coach. You can see if what you're selecting is the criteria you intended on. And then you can get better for the next time around.

Give yourself grace. This happens in increments. The most important thing is that you are aware of what is average or better.





Episode: #141

Average Or Better Dog Training Question: What Did You Just Reward?

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I'd love to hear what you think of this. So, either jump on over YouTube and leave me a comment about the concept of average or better. And if you are here on YouTube, go ahead and hit the subscribe buttons so you can be part of our online community here on YouTube. And hit the notification bell because that way some angel's getting their wings and you will be notified when our next podcast episode is available.

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I'll see you next time here on Shaped by Dog.

Resources:

[Podcast Episode 2: Reinforcement](#)

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

[Podcast Episode 135: Test Your Dog's Sit Stay Training](#)

[Podcast Episode 21: The 5 Critical Dog Training Layers for Confidence with Anything](#)

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

[Podcast Episode 133: Become Your Own Dog Training Coach With This Video Strategy](#)



Average Or Better Dog Training Question: What Did You Just Reward?

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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