

Balanced Dog Training: Does It Really Exist?

Speaker Key

SG Susan Garrett

Transcript

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SG Balanced dog training, does it really exist? And if it does exist, why isn't everybody a balanced dog trainer? And for those people who aren't a balanced dog trainer, does that mean they're out of balance?

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But first let's talk about balanced dog training. Now, if you are here and you are a balanced dog trainer then you know what I mean when I say balanced dog trainer. Let me just tell you my perspective. I too once was a balanced dog trainer. And I believe there are some brilliant dog trainers out there that call themselves balanced dog trainers. So, I am not here to say all of the best dog trainers in the world are not.

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So, for those of you who are going like "Susan, you haven't really explained what a balanced dog trainer is and I'm about to click off. Why do I need to know this?" You need to know this because number one, we're going to talk about the four quadrants of operant conditioning. And that is the science of how dogs actively learn, not how dogs are conditioned. We'll talk about that another time. This is how dogs actively learn. There's four quadrants to that.

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Now, once you are aware of what they are, I want to take you through my evolution as a dog trainer. Let me just tell you - I'm going to share with you my very first ever dog training book. I still have it. Published in 1965. I didn't get it in 1965. I think I got it when I was about 11 years old. So that's close to 50 years ago. And dog-eared the section on training because I was crazy in love with training, and this was my first foray into balanced training. So that's what I learned first.

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All right. So, let's talk about it. Balanced dog training. There's four quadrants, all right. It's four ways that we can communicate with our dogs. Four ways that we can help alter behavior. Now, in my drawing, the top left is going to be positive reinforcement, right? The R and the plus. The plus just means that you are adding something. Reinforcement means behavior is increasing in frequency.

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Now beside that is the P plus, which is positive punishment. So, aha, if you're new to this all of a sudden, you're going to go "Well, wait a minute. Um, how can it be positive?" Because most people think of positive as good, and negative is bad. Not when we're talking about behavior. So, there can be punishment that is positive.

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It's just something being added that makes it positive. And likewise, we have reinforcement that's negative. It still increases the frequency of a behavior, and we have punishment that's negative.



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Now the thing about punishment, it actually suppresses behavior. Instead of increasing the frequency of behavior, it suppresses behavior. That's really, really important. And to know that suppression doesn't mean elimination. Suppression sometimes leads to it going away indefinitely, but most often punishment suppresses behavior. Okay.

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So, let's jump back at things that are pretty obvious to most of you. Reinforcement back when I started my formal dog training in the 80s it was, it meant like a tennis ball, kibble that I fed my dogs back then. And the real tasty treats, the microwave hot dogs — so I do not feed my dogs anymore. And you know if you were a hunting dog, reinforcement could be a bird.

The [key is with reinforcement, with positive reinforcement](#), with any reinforcement, only the dog knows what's reinforcing.

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So, you can't go, "Oh, I bought these really expensive treats. Yeah. You're going to love them. They're salamanders." And your dog is going "Yeah, I don't eat salamanders." That's the difference between the word treats or rewards and reinforcement. Reinforcement means the animal is willing to work for it like "Yeah, I like it. Uh, yeah, I think I'm going to get excited when I see that."

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Okay. Now I'm putting a gold star here, well it's not really gold, but pretend a gold star on positive reinforcement because all trainers can agree that when you reinforce behavior they are going to grow. And so, it's the gold standard. It is what all dog trainers can agree on that giving a dog something that they love is a way to help a dog learn. Okay. So, we're there.

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Now let's take a look at what else we can add to a dog besides cookies and things they like. We add things they don't like. So, adding things like just verbal reprimands, "Hey!", "No!", "Ah-ah!", "Stop it!", gritting your teeth when you're saying something to your dog. So, you're adding words. Now it's only the dog that tells you that they're punishers, right?

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Either they're emotionally effecting the dog or they're physically in the form of popping them on the neck with a collar, a chain collar, a pinch collar, flat collar. That when you're adding something, and the dog feels discomfort then they've decided that's punishing. Now if I yelled no to my dogs, they wouldn't think that's punishing because they don't have a history of being punished with that word. Okay. You follow me on that one?

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Positive punishment. You may do it intentionally. You may do it unintentionally. Now let's drop down to negative punishers. Negative, right? It means taking away. We're taking away something. Now obviously the dog finds that's punishing so the dog really, really liked what we were taking away. So, we could take away reinforcements. Like we're going to take away a ball they're playing with. We could take away the dog from a reinforcement, from a situation where they were being reinforced. Like a dog that maybe was [fence running](#) with a neighbor's dog. We remove that dog and put them in the house.



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They would find that punishing because we're taking them away from something that they were enjoying doing if they were, you know, having fun with their buddy next door. Okay. So negative punishment. Sometimes you might call this a time out. They could be [used as a time out](#). The key is with anything that we're doing when we are punishing, it's just so hard guys, but you've got to remove emotion from this. The dog isn't bad. You were focusing on a behavior.

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This is where balanced training goes wrong. Is when people add their emotion to it. So negative is taking something away. The punishment is—the reinforcement is gone. So, if you're giving your dog a time out you don't have to like chain them in a dark closet and tell them they're bad. Where the time out is I'm taking you away from something that you loved or I'm taking something that you loved away from you. Super important. Okay.

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Negative reinforcement. There's a couple different sides to negative reinforcement. So negative reinforcement means you take something away and when it's gone the dog says, "Oh, that's really amazing." All right. I think of back in the day when I used to have to put pantyhose on every day when to go to work. When I would take them off oh man, that was really reinforcing for me. All right. I digress.

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So, what we're taking away from the dog, obviously they didn't like it. So, they find it reinforcing. Now, picture something that the dog finds very uncomfortable, like an electric collar. So, the trainer would give a stim or a little bit of electricity, a shock to the dog and we'll hold that shock down or the stim down. So, the dog feels the pain or the discomfort of the aversive of electric collar and they will stop doing something. And when they stopped doing it the trainer will release the button which takes away the discomfort.

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That's how negative reinforcement works. "Oh, thank God it stopped. Oh, yay. Oh, I got it. I got it. You don't want me doing that anymore? Okay. We're good. We're good." "Yeah. You didn't want me chasing that rabbit and when you called me. Okay, we're good. We're good. We're good." That's how negative reinforcement. But the behavior will increase in frequency because that's how reinforcement works.

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Here's the other side of negative reinforcement. A lot of it happens because people aren't aware. Take for example you're walking to the lake and your [dog loves to swim and he's like digging in and pulling in](#) and you're like, I can't take this anymore. And you just unclip the leash and let them go. So, what did you just reinforce?

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The dog got reinforced for pulling and barking and whatever he was doing, the nonsense behaviors he was doing. Dogs on a [head halter](#). They start rubbing their face on your leg or on the ground and you go, "Oh, you don't want that on. I'll take that off." You've just reinforced them for rubbing their face. The [thing before the thing](#). That's what gets me reinforcement. That's what I'm going to do next time to get the reinforcement of getting that off.



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Dogs who bark in their crate. And you go over, and you let them out of [their crate](#). That's reinforcing because you're taking them away from the barrier that's preventing them from having their freedom. The thing that got that is getting reinforced, which was barking at you.

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So, with negative reinforcement, there is intentional negative reinforcement that some people may choose to use in training. When back in the day when I did competition obedience a lot of people use what they called a force fetch, where they would cause pain to a dog by like pinching on their ear. Back in the early 90s I sat on a committee for the humane and ethical treatment of animals in training and it was unbelievable all of the different tools that trainers used in the name of training in order to cause discomfort to dogs who might've had a very high pain tolerance. Maybe were bred for it, or maybe just through training that that they had to turn up the pain a little bit more.

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Now, some of you balanced trainers are saying, "Well, that was just ineffective training." Not here to judge just reporting on what I observed back when I was on that committee. Okay. So, we've got reinforcement. Positive reinforcement. We really, really want to optimize that. And we've got negative punishment.

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For me and the way I go about my training, I really want to minimize that. And then we've got negative reinforcement and positive punishment. For me in my evolution, I want to eliminate those. So that's what would make somebody like me, an unbalanced trainer in the eyes of balanced trainers. But let's face it.

Balanced trainers aren't really balanced. Because balanced trainers in order to be balanced would have to do spend 25% of the time of the dog reinforcing behaviors positively, 25 reinforcing negatively, 25 positively punishing, and 25% negatively punishing.

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They don't, right? Because the best dog trainers no matter how they choose to train dogs, they're spending most of their time reinforcing the dog and they are not spending a lot of time punishing the dog. So how did this evolve for me?

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Back when I started training dogs using my good old books, I was really using a little bit of cookie. And then when I thought the dog should know it because I done enough different locations, then I moved in to say, "Right, you need a correction. I will put my chain collar on, and you will get a correction because you should know better."

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My expectation of the dog was quite high. I've put in some time. "I don't like what you're doing, and you don't fit into my lifestyle the way you're doing things now." And so, I was very, very close to these four quadrants. I honestly didn't understand negative reinforcement very well. So, it wasn't something I went to. I really was, I had a few things in positive reinforcement and a few of my faves in positive punishment. That's how I went about dog training. Those things were very, very close to me.



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Now, as I carried on my journey in dog training, I found that I was being more and more curious and more and more innovative and creative about how I could come up with ways to reinforce my dog. Now by 1993 I had made the decision. I didn't want to use positive punishment in my training anymore. I had read this book was my next big influential book called "*Lads Before the Wind*" by Karen Pryor. Actually, autographed by Karen.

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I had decided I want to try and just train my dogs using only positive reinforcement. I didn't do so well. What I was doing is I was taking my model of my balanced training and rather than using positive punishment I was just using a heck of a lot of negative punishment. So, a lot of time outs for my dogs. And guess what happened, they got frustrated and frustrated. It was my expectations being too high and my abilities to execute on what I wanted, because I didn't really know how to get what I wanted.

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I was at that time one of the better competitors in the sport of dog agility, but I didn't know how to get what I want with my Terriers in particular. And so, I just went all in innovating and innovating. And by 1998, I had written two thirds of my book of [Shaping Success](#), where I had trained my dog using more and more just reinforcement based.

Now this morning I came across this [excellent presentation](#) of what this looks like schematically, and it was a behavior consultant by the name of Sara Richter.

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And she put it like this, which I just think is amazing. As you start focusing more on reinforcement guess what, you get better at reinforcing. And your use of reinforcement grows and grows and grows and grows and grows. It's kind of like eating healthy, right? I became a vegan 15 years ago and I just slowly started eliminating the eating of meat. And until finally it just wasn't an option for me.

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And so, for me focusing on all the different ways, like it's no longer kibble and cheese and a tennis ball and a tug toy. Like reinforcement is about the environment; [it's about permission](#). It's about so many different layers. There were so many things that made my little quadrant of reinforcement explode and expand. So that reaching for punishment wasn't an option because it was way too far outside of what I was doing.

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My use of negative punishment dramatically reduced. And I can't honestly think of a time that I would say to you, I always use negative punishment for this reason. If I'm using negative punishment, it would be something where I might just pause and look away for like a second. And I rarely do that. When I'm training a puppy, I can't think of a time when I would do that. All right. So, it grows, and it grows, and it grows. And it's just not something that is an option for me.

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Now, if I had back in 1988 tried to do this, I would've failed miserably. With my Jack Russell Terrier, I didn't know what I know now about how to reinforce a dog. I didn't have any understanding. And I'm not saying if you're not experienced with reinforcement, don't try this. It's going to fail. All I'm saying is if you are failing, you need to consider possibly there are more ways that you're not aware of.



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Maybe there are ways that your dog is getting reinforcement through negative reinforcement that you haven't even considered. And really, it's not for me to say, this is the way everyone should train. Because we all have a dog training philosophy, and it starts with our core values. And if you've listened to my podcasts, you know I've said this many times that I believe that dogs do the best they can with the education we give them in the environment that we've put them in.

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And if they're not making the right choices then our expectations are too high, and our investment of our time and our understanding has not been enough to get the results that we are expecting. So, it's your core value. It's your education. It's your level of curiosity. Like some people go around life 'If it ain't broke don't fix it.' 'You know what, this worked for my last 10 dogs, this is the way I'm going to train my next one.' Well, that means you're still training dogs the way you were 30 years.

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And I, my mantra is I'm a lifelong learner. I like to stay curious and humble at everything I do. I don't want my ego to get in my way. I want to always explore what's possible for me so that 'it ain't broke don't fix' has never been a way, a path I've taken in my life. It's like, I know how to do it this way. I know how to get my dog to do weave poles using a cookie and a lure. I wonder what it'd be like if I used a channel. And I know how to use weave poles with a channel. I wonder what it would be like if I used something innovative and new, and that came about with my 2 x 2 method of weave pole training. But this isn't about dog agility.

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And so, it's your core values. It's your education, your curiosity. It's your mentorship. Who do you look up to and what are they achieving? Are they getting the results you want using the way you feel comfortable training your dog? And it's the peer group you surround yourself with, which is why we created these social groups for our online classes, because it was hard for people to find other people that were training the way we do using games and high level of innovative reinforcement to get the outstanding results that we get.

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Not just with the family pets, but I just love it when I see people who join up for one of our Recallers programs, and then they go on to join an agility program. They've never done agility before, but they're stars because they've just felt connected the dots.

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Right. And so that's what creates your philosophy. But then your philosophy kind of gets a fork in the road when you're under pressure and things aren't going the way you want. How do you respond when you're frustrated by your dog's behavior? And you're like, I don't mean like, "Oh, you pooped on the rug again."

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I mean, you are ready to pull out your hair. That really is a defining moment for what is your dog training philosophy. It could be your in-laws are here and you're just so embarrassed or you want your dog to do something. Do you resort back to what you learned first? If you're at a big competition, do you resort back to "Can't you just listen to me?!"



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And for me that evolution that I thought I had made starting back in 1993 when I said I want to be a reinforcement-based dog trainer and all the way through to writing that book *Shaping Success*, I thought, "Okay. Yeah, I got this." Certainly, I kept evolving but by 2007 I had a real wake-up moment when I was trading my then puppy Feature who you see behind me.

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Now, this is the full circle moment where I tell you why I have stepped back from the podcast for the last month because I lost Feature to cancer. And I told myself I wouldn't get upset, but this is one of the most valuable lessons that I learned from her.

She was seven— eight weeks old and I was playing a game with her.

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I was on my knees, and I was playing this really, really fun game, Crate Games. And she was loving it. She was diving in the kennel, and I had to go out and teach right away. There were people waiting and I was pulling her back and she was diving in the kennel, and I got her so excited. As young puppies do, she went over threshold.

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So, when I sent her to a kennel, she jumped up and bit me in the face. And I immediately grabbed her collar and gave her a swift little clip under her chin with my hand. And then she went in her kennel, and I called her back out and I tried to love her up, she wasn't the same dog. And I had to go out and teach.

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So, at 10:30 I said to my husband, "Can you just bring the puppy out? I just want a break. I just want to you know, try and engage her again." She was not quite the same. So, this had been you know, I had changed to I'm not using positive punishment anymore in 1993. And then here we go in 1998, how many years later? 15 years later, 10 years later, I'm writing a book about how the success I'm having here.

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And this is now almost 10 years after that and here I hit this little puppy under the chin. Just a quick little chip. Now you could say, "Well Susan, she probably never bit you in the face again, did she?" She didn't. But there were so many things wrong with that situation. I was in a hurry that I took that puppy over threshold. How do you expect an eight-week-old puppy not to make mistakes? And why should you have your face down there?

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Now it took me a while to learn the lesson of don't put your face down there because in 2015 when Feature had a litter of puppies and I was playing with one of them with my face down there, and that puppy jumped up and bit my face and drew blood my reaction was to laugh.

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And I knew I had come full circle as somebody who choose— who had made a conscious choice to [leave the world that looks at dogs as needing to be punished](#) behind. That I laughed and I have a picture holding the puppy because it was such a proud moment for me at the realization is my innate response is no longer to say, "Why did you do that to me?!"



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When you are under pressure, when you're feeling extreme, frustrated, that's what tells you what your real philosophy about dog training is. And finally, I just want to ask those of you who are trying to move this way or who are leaders in moving this way.

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There's a lot of people I hear talking about their dogs and I know it's jokingly, but they call their dogs a jerk or an a-hole or— if you want congruency with—you know, think of dogs as your eight-year-old little buddy. Would you talk to your about a little eight year old friend you had as an a-hole or jerk? Just consider that when you're talking about your dog.

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So, I thank you for hanging in and being loyal followers even though I took that month away as I learn to recover from such a great loss. I got a lot of great podcasts left in me and I look forward to sharing them all with you. I'll see you next time right here on Shaped by Dog.

Resources:

[Podcast Episode 94: How the Best Professional Dog Trainers Use Reinforcement](#)

[Podcast Episode 88: Barrier Frustration: Help for Fence Fighting, Leash Reactivity and Window Guarding](#)

[Podcast Episode 34: Time Outs for Dogs: Does Your Dog Need One?](#)

[YouTube Video: Susan Garrett Riffs on Transfer of Value in Dog Training \(and water loving Labradors\)](#)

[Podcast Episode 40: Using A Head Halter On A Dog, Why My Approach Is So Different](#)

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

[YouTube Playlist: Crate Games and Crate Training for Puppies and Dogs with Susan Garrett](#)

[Book: Shaping Success by Susan Garrett](#)

[TikTok presentation with Sara Richter, CDBC on the 4 Quadrants](#)

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

[Podcast Episode 102: Transitioning Your Dog Training: From All That Is Wrong To That Which Is Right](#)



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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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