

The Game Within The Game: How To Multiply Your Dog's Reinforcements

Speaker Key

SG Susan Garrett

Transcript

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SG To the uninitiated, reinforcement-based dog training really looks like you have to walk around with a boatload of cookies, or else you're not going to get your dog to do what you want. And that's just not true. But for those of you who are still stuck in the stage of walking around with a boatload of cookies, what do you do and how do you get out of that? That's the topic of today's podcast.

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Hi, I'm Susan Garrett, welcome to Shaped by Dog. And let me explain to you the way that I go about reinforcement-based dog training is different. It's pretty different from the way most people go about it. And it really comes from my background. When I was 17 years old, I was in high school, and I applied for a summer job with the government.

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There were I think 50 jobs that I applied for and the one that I wanted the least was called the Junior Agriculturalist Program where they took a kid from the city and put them on a farm. I got on a dairy farm, completely out of my element, knew nothing about farming. Never really touched a cow or seen a cow up close. I did like horses though. So, I thought it would be okay.

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The first week, the farmer was always after me for dragging my heels and walking so slow and to lift my head, my head was always down. I was so out of my element. And then on Sunday afternoon, we played baseball. Out of my way. We were out in the field, he was hitting balls to his kids and I, and I was like catching balls all over the place.

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And he said, "Wow, you turned into a different person. You know what? You should find a job in your life where you can turn it into a game for yourself." And that was when I was almost 18 actually. I was like a very young person, and it stuck with me ever since, and that's exactly what I did.

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I've created motivation for myself by turning everything into a game. And likewise, I've done the same for my dogs. And some of it honestly, I just happened on it, but when I learned more about the science I realized, "Hey, I'm onto a good thing here." So, we teach with games. But you can't just leave it at that.

So for example, dogs all have really two primary reinforcements, or three. So, it could be food obviously, they need that to survive. Water, they need that to survive. And sex, they need that to reproduce. But in dog training we really only think about using food.

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But then there's secondary reinforcers. So yes, a click is a secondary reinforcer and in that it represents 'you're going to earn a cookie'. But toys, when we play tug with our dog, that's a secondary reinforcer because they don't need it really to survive.



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But then we've got to get further away from the reinforcement if we don't want to you know, have that wagon full of cookies following us around everywhere we go with a dog. And so, for me that means I teach my dog games. I'm not unique in that way. Something as simple as a [Hand Target](#) where you teach your dog to touch their nose to your hand. "Oh yay, that's a game I taught my dog."

But now we've got to go deeper. We've got to go to a place I call 'a game within a game'. Now, a game within a game is when the primary reason for playing the game is disguised within the context of a much more simple game.

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I'll give you an example. I can take any dog who knows a Hand Target and I can get them to line up very nicely at my side. Why do I care about that? Well, if I'm walking and my dog is facing me and maybe I need to open a door, so I can use my Hand Target in a very strategic way to get my dog at my side.

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Likewise in the sport of dog agility, we need our dogs to sit at our side at the start line so that we can leave. Now, over the thousands of seminars that I've taught over my lifetime, I've had a lot of students who struggled getting their dog at their side, so I would teach them this simple trick. To the dog it looks like they're just doing a Hand Target and they love doing Hand Targets because it means 'I might get a cookie'.

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And all that you do, I'm going to just walk you through it right here. Let's say we want our dog to line up on our left side. You are going to present your dog your left hand but what you're going to do, with your feet together, you're going to keep your right foot planted, and you're going to just step back on your left foot. So, it's in line with where you were just standing.

You're going to extend your left hand back for the dog to touch it. They touch it, you drop a cookie to them back there. We're placing reinforcement in a place where we want them to go. And then you just step forward. When the dog steps forward, you quickly step back before they can get their butt moving out in front again. Quickly step back, put your hand way back there. They touch your hand with their nose, you drop the cookie back there.

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You might do that three or four times and then instead of giving them the cookie back there, you bring your feet together, you look to your left and say "sit". The dog was back there expecting their cookie, but now they're coming up here you give them their cookie in the sit position. The game within the game. They thought they were just doing Hand Targets. Lo and behold, you were teaching them 'I need you to be at my side.'

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Are you very familiar with the 2010 remake of the Karate Kid? So, it had Jackie Chan as Mr. Han and Jayden Smith played his student Dre. Now Dre was given this task to do where he had to take his jacket off in a certain way and he had to then drop it on the floor in front of him, then pick it up and hang it on a hook. And then take it off the hook, put it on himself a certain way, and then take it off and drop it on the floor and then pick it up and put it on the hook.



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Now, Dre thought he was doing this exercise because he needed to learn about respect. That was what he was led to believe. That he was disrespecting Mr. Han by dropping his coat on the floor and so he was given this task. And every day he would come in and he thought he was there to learn kung fu because he'd got beaten up by some neighborhood kids and he would say, "What am I doing today Mr. Han?" And he'd say, "the coat". And he would do this thousands and thousands of times until one day he had a meltdown.

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He said, "I don't even think you know kung fu." because of course he'd never seen Mr. Han do kung fu. And he said, "That's it. I quit." And Mr. Han got him to come over and he told him, "pick up the coat." Because he had thrown the coat on the floor again. So, he picked it up and as he was in the motion Mr. Han knocked it out of his hand and said, "Pick it up again."

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And when he was going through the motion, Mr. Han grabbed his arm, let him see how strong he'd become. Then he walked him through some kung fu sparring. This kid didn't even know he could do it. He could block his hits. He could duck out of the way because he'd learned all these skills by picking up the coat, putting it on, dropping it on the floor, and hanging it up. The game within a game. Although in that case, I don't know if Dre would say he was having a lot of fun.

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So, for our dogs we make sure that the game within the game is still a lot of fun because it's transferring the value from the reinforcement into the game. The game within a game. The value of the food goes into the Hand Target. I'm sure I could put my hand out and my dogs would touch that hand upwards of 30, 40, 50 times. I've actually done it once and stopped my dog at a hundred times.

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They would just touch the hand. Sometimes they'd look at me like, "Do you see what I'm doing here? I'm touching the hand". They would just keep nose targeting my hand because the value of the reinforcement has gone into the hand because I use the Hand Target for so many different games within the game.

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Actually, I spoke with this in the context of teaching children, and I think it was [podcast episode number five](#), one of my first ever podcasts, where I said we could teach kids, put an outline of duct tape on the floor or masking tape on the floor. Teach kids to manipulate a bean with a broom into that square and then put out a couple more beans so they'd have to manipulate the broom and the bean into the square.

And before you know it, you could put beans all over. And the game within the game was the kid was having fun getting something in a square but the game within the game is, ah! they're learning to sweep the floor, right?

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I spoke about this also in [podcast episode number 148](#). And this one was like a big game within a game that I had planned for quite some time. I had a group of people in for a workshop here.



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There was, four groups of 12 students I believe it was, and I split them up equally and I made them into teams, and they thought they were in a competition with a pair. And so, one of the pair was trying to see how far away they could get their dog to go and do a behavior. And the other person thought they were doing how many different positions could they be and as a handler and get the dog to do a position from up close.

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What they didn't realize, and I wanted them to feel the pain and feel the excitement of dog training works best if you [create 5Cs](#). Connection, which they both groups had connection. Clarity, which the group that was doing, they did hundreds of repetitions of the behavior from super close, but with them in different positions. So, the dog was learning to generalize the behavior many, many times over. The other group was just getting the dog to do it at a further way distance and at the end of the day, at the end of four days of camp actually, the people that were just growing confidence for a behavior that dog actually could do more distance than the people that were trying to focus on the distance.

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So, my game within the game is what they thought they were working on wasn't giving them the results. The big, big reveal at the end was, all you have to do is create clarity and confidence in your dog and they can do things at a distance. And when you focus on the distance, it's much harder to do. So, for me I always think a game within a game.

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Honestly, I don't remember the year this was, it was maybe in the 90s or early 2000s. I went to chicken camp. My mentors Bob and the late Dr. Marian Bailey. And Marian was an icon. She was a graduate student of BF Skinner. And we were teaching chickens. They used chickens as a model to help you understand dog training concepts.

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And we had to teach a chicken discrimination. Peck a triangle, a circle, or a square. If you peck something else, then we're going to remove the opportunity for you to ever earn reinforcement. So, you work in partners. So, my partner was training her chicken and her chicken was to peck the triangle. And when the chicken didn't peck the triangle, they pecked the square, instead of like blocking the square we just picked up the triangle.

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So, the chicken could try and peck the square and try and peck the circle. They got nothing. And as soon as they stopped pecking, we were to put the triangle down so the chicken could learn what was right, and what wouldn't earn reinforcement. You got it? It's called the discrimination. Well, the game within the game for Susan was I thought while my partner is shaping her chicken, I'm going to shape her chicken too.

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So, what I did was I withheld the triangle until the chicken turned away from me and looked at my partner, and then I'd put it on the ground, like it was just subtle. And then the next time I waited until the chicken moved towards my partner, then I put it on the ground.



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And I kept progressing this game until the chicken started flapping her wings and running towards my partner. At that point, my partner figured it out, who by the way was a very long-time friend of mine. So, it wasn't like I was doing this to an unsuspecting soul. But I probably would've done it as well because that's the kind of person I am. Everything's a game within a game.

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So, at the same time my good friend Ruthie figured out what I was doing, Dr. Marian Bailey walked by and looked at me and stopped and looked at Bob and said, "You know, there's always one in every crowd." and kept going. So, she knew immediately what I had done and you know, they probably didn't like me messing up the chickens that way.

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But there's a game within a game and that is the beauty of training with games. To the outside, to the uninitiated it just looks like, "Oh, look at that little Susan Garrett, she teaches her students to play these games." Not recognizing that the games get built into other games to create larger behaviors, to get further away from the primary reinforcement, so the transfer of value keeps going down so the dogs just love to work, regardless if they see the reinforcement obvious to them or not.

Regardless if the person has that reinforcement on them, the transfer of value has now gone from one game to another game, but it's also in that transfer gone to the human, which adds to the connection, which adds to the dog's focus, which adds to the dog's drive to work.

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So, for me everything is a game within a game. I ask my dogs to go outside, they sit. I put my hand on the door, they sit. That comes from [Crate Games](#). Why do I do it? Am I a control freak just trying to make sure my dogs know that I'm the leader and I'm the B? No, it's a game within a game. Number one, going outside is massive reinforcement.

They get to chase each other, they get to have fun, and of course they get to relieve themselves first thing in the morning. And so, why just give it away? Why just give away that reinforcement? Why not use it to build in a behavior that transfers the value of the reinforcement of going outside, through you.

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Number two reason why I do this is because I love my dogs to understand the concept of cued behavior, a gap, and the reinforcement of the release cue, right? I've talked about that process so many times here on the podcast. And so, if every single time I let my dogs outside I'm rehearsing that little behavior chain, they really get the understanding of 'when they're in a control position, wait for the power word, the release word before they move'.

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You know what, probably the biggest reason I do this is because it allows me to open the door, and if I get surprised by something on the other side, like one morning there was a rabid raccoon right at the front door. My dogs aren't going anywhere, I can close the door.

Or the UPS guy might be whipping through the driveway, which why do they go so fast? Or I might be releasing my dog from the car. If I open the car door, I want my dogs always to understand that they're not allowed to get out. Even if they were riding loose, which I don't let them ride loose.



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So, it's a safety valve. It's a game within a game that is functional because I do agility. And so how many times have I released them from that door, which helped build this amazing start line that I have. But it's also a safety valve. It's a game within a game that gets woven into the fabric of life with me.

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At the end of that sequence, of that exchange between Mr. Han and Dre, where they did this kung fu fighting and Dre didn't realize he had been learning kung fu while he was doing coat on, coat off. You could see this look on Dre's face when, you know, they're breathless and at the end he realizes that "I'm doing kung fu. I learned kung fu."

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And he thought all he was doing was learning respect. But Mr. Han said to him, "What you need to learn is everything is kung fu." And that's the message I have for you. Everything with your dogs can be a game within a game. And that's how the transfer of value keeps stacking. And that's how you build such an amazing, deep connection with your dogs.

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If you understand what I mean I'd love for you to jump over to YouTube and leave me a comment. If you're new to this and you're struggling to understand what I'm saying, I'd love to hear from you as well. Because I love to deepen your understanding of this because it's just the greatest way to live life with a dog. I'll see you next time right here on Shaped by Dog.

Resources

[Susan Garrett's Target Stick Training for Dogs Part One - All About Targeting](#)

[Podcast Episode 5: What is Shaping And How Can Dogs Shape Us](#)

[Podcast Episode 148: Your Dog Listening At A Distance Part 2: Critical Timing Of Distractions](#)

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

[Crate Games](#)



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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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