

Outsmarting Distractions: How To Use Environmental Reinforcement In Dog Training

Speaker Key

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Transcript

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SG In Las Vegas at the casinos, they have this expression, "The house always wins." In dog training, there is a similar expression and that is: "The environment always wins." But I'm here to tell you that doesn't have to be the truth. So let's get into it and let me share how we can neutralize that environment for your dog.

Hi, I'm Susan Garrett. Welcome to Shaped by Dog podcast episode number 197, just three podcast episodes away from our 200th episode. And oh, the celebration is turning out to be something really exciting. We have so far five special guests that are going to be joining me for our live, celebrating our 200th episode. I'm talking about epic guests.

We will have giveaways so if you are a sponsor and you'd like to have us give away your product, you can contact my team [wag@dogsthat.com]. Because you could be one of the people whose stuff we give away. The more stuff to giveaway to our listeners the better as far as I'm concerned. Okay, back to today's podcast.

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[Podcast episode number 196](#) was all about reinforcement in that if you're going to be a reinforcement-based dog trainer, somebody who doesn't turn to the use of aversives, of physical punishment, of intimidation, then you have to get really, really good at the understanding on the application of reinforcement. What is it that reinforces your dog?

And you know some people might think, "Oh, this sounds like a lot of work." But it's worth it. And I just think it's so cool to empower our dogs to have this great connection and relationship with us. Like it's just win, win, win all the way around. But what is the nefarious enemy in all of this? It's that dastardly power of the environment.

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That may not have been something you considered when I said in podcast 196, "List all the things that reinforce your dog." And what happens is the dogs love for the environment or the power of that environment is something that grows over time. So, for example you might say, "Oh, my dog loves food." And it's this awareness of, where does your dog get food?

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"Well, you know, we train, I give him treats." Really? Is that all? What about when he goes in the kitchen, he sniffs around the baseboard where you were cutting to see if there's any scraps? Guess what, he might sniff there 10 times, 20 times, nothing to be found. And then the 21st time, he finds a big chunk of cheese that you didn't know that had fallen.

And if you listen to [podcast episode number 174](#), I talked about dopamine hits are the highest when the dog gets a negative prediction error. Meaning, what they were expecting to get as a reinforcement was not anywhere near as good as what they got. And so, if your dog finds this piece of cheese then holy smokes, "I'm going to start sniffing all my environments. Maybe there'll be manna from heaven on the floor somewhere else."



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And so, this sniffing around or maybe even starts licking around, you, number one, might not notice it. Or number two, you might utter the three words that will come back and bite you in the butt. And that is, "I don't mind. Yeah, he sniffed the floor. He found something. I don't mind."

See, [layers of learning](#) happening intentionally through us are really cool things when we're using reinforcement. Layers of learning when they're happening accidentally through the environment are equally as powerful, but they're working against us.

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Because what happens next is in that dog's sniffing around the kitchen, one day the dishwasher is open and he starts sniffing and he's like, "Oh, there's food left on these plates." So he'll start licking the plates. "Hmm. I don't mind. I don't mind."

So, then what happens is, "Oh, I got stuff on the floor. I got stuff the next level up. What's this? Oh, it's a garbage bin. I'm just going to knock that over or flip the lid up and stick my head in." And there might not be anything in there the first time he does it or the second or the 10th or the 20th, the 21st time though guess what, ding, ding, ding. Just like the jackpots in Las Vegas, he gets a big payout. Negative prediction error, boom, "I'll be knocking over every garbage bin I can find."

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Now you might mind about that, so you start taking the garbage bins, putting them up on the counter when you leave the room so that doesn't happen anymore. But we started on the floor. We got some good reinforcement there. We got up to the dishwasher. Some more stuff there. Went a little higher to the garbage bins. Now what's at that height? Oh, this is like a baby's highchair. "Look at the little bottom of the highchair, I find some crumbs. Oh, crumbs are good."

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Lo and behold, they keep sniffing time and time again, and I don't know what time it is that they're going to find big handfuls of food that the baby left there. Ding, ding, ding. The kitchen pays out big, environmental rewards for the dog. Ding, ding, ding, ding, ding, ding, found on the floor, in the dishwasher, in the garbage can, on the baby's tray.

"How about I just check the counters. I just go right to the source." And all of a sudden, we get people writing in and saying, "I don't know, out of the blue, he just started [counter surfing](#). He was never a counter surfer. I don't know how it happened, Susan." It's that darn environment always wins.

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Environment always wins. And it isn't always just with food. It could be like your dog loves toys. We play with our toys. But what is a toy? Like let's define a toy. Your socks, if you have a puppy, could be great toys, or your slippers, or the kids' toys, piece of Lego. All of that are jackpots that the environment is doling out for the dog.

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So, he starts to look in places that he wouldn't have looked before if he had never found those jackpots. And then did you consider when I asked you to think about all the things that your dog gets reinforced by, did you think about things like activities that the dog loves? So yes, spraying with the hose or [going for a swim](#).



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What about if you do barn hunt or agility or lure coursing or do you do bitey sports? Mm, dogs love bitey sports. Or Mm, do you do bird work, hunting dogs, those are massively exciting reinforcement. What about fly ball now? Now, all of these things, amazing dopamine hits. I mean, off the charts. I come to this place, "I didn't know what this place was. All of a sudden, I get to bite people's arms." Or, "All of a sudden, I get to retrieve a bird."

What is the thing before the thing? Every time you take your dog off to do barn hunt, or to do a sport that they love, or to go for a swim, what is the thing before the thing? And I talk about that in [podcast episode number 16](#), what is it that your dog is doing?

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Most of the time the dog has learned the second or third time out, "I love this. I can't wait to do it." They might start squealing or pulling on leash, clawing themselves to get closer to where we start this event. And then you reinforce that behavior by taking them off the leash. Thing before the thing. "In order to get what I want, I scream, I pull, I claw, and I get reinforced."

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Because the environment has all of these things. It could be chasing other dogs, chasing wildlife, right? That 'I have to bark. I'm pulling on leash. I'm barking. You let me off, I go. I chase.' Now, what we're doing is we're establishing for your dog, starting with the dishwasher, starting with the crumbs on the kitchen floor, all the way up to chasing dogs at a dog park or chasing wildlife in the woods, or playing sports that you love to play together.

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We're establishing that reinforcement happens away from you, in the environment. So, "Let's start checking out the environment. And let's start screaming more because that gets us what we want." And if you've already established this pattern with your dog, because you said those three little words, "I don't mind if he licks the floor. I don't mind if he cleans up the baby's highchair. Actually, that's handy for me."

You just didn't have that awareness. So now we have an awareness, let's be intentional about where that reinforcement comes for our dog and how we can have it come through us. Because that's when reinforcement-based dog training works the best.

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It isn't just about you training a certain way during a class for one hour a day and maybe practicing that certain way for 10 minutes throughout the week. That's reinforcement-based dog training done in isolation.

But in order for reinforcement-based dog training to be most effective, it's got to be a way of life. It's got to be the way you breathe. It's got to be who you are. So, you have to have an awareness of 'where's my dog getting the reinforcement now?'

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And it's not just about getting control over the dog, it's about the safety for the dog. It's about the dependability and the relationship that you share with that dog. You want a dog whose behaviors you can depend on. That it doesn't matter if they see a rabbit, if they see a deer, if they see other dogs, you can just call them and they will come back.



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When you've got to that place, now you're living in environmental neutrality. "Yes, I can get things, but the thing before the thing is I have to maybe get into [Reinforcement Zone](#). I have to sit, down, stand, maybe turn around. Then I get released to the thing that I love, most of all. To go and play bitey sports or to go and hunt birds."

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You're taking that value of the things the dog, really, really loves and you are taking it on board for you, so your dog understands it all goes through you. So, what does that look like in the real world? First of all, you're going to have an awareness like I personally suggest you not let your dog just scavenge the floor for food. Because if you play [ItsYerChoice](#) which is a game that empowers the dog that you are learning to earn. It's a learn to earn.

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ItsYerChoice. Make good choices, get good reinforcement. Then ItsYerChoice should be in play when there's food on the floor in the kitchen. You should go, "Uh, excuse me. I see food here. Uh, who's going to get that food?"

I occasionally will let my dog get the food, but I will pick it up and feed them. More often than not, I will go to the fridge, and I'll get a better reinforcement and feed them that and pick that one and put it in the compost bin or something.

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So, what does that look like? So, number one, it's that awareness. The good, the bad, the ugly. What is ugly reinforcement? Yeah, I don't know. But there's good and there's bad reinforcement. Reinforcement patterns we don't want to see carrying on because they are taking our dog away from us.

They're taking our dog to the place where the environment will always win. To a place where the only way you're going to keep that dog safe is to either always have them on a leash or to use punishment to get them to listen. Which you know what if you're listening to this, I bet you don't want to go there because I know I don't want to go there.

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So, it's an awareness of what our dogs find outrageously reinforcement, how we can get them to come through us. And for me, it's simple. I start this with puppies. You can start this, if you have a rescue dog, you can start this with your dog right now. It is starting to neutralize the environment by of course being aware and not allowing your dog to get reinforcement from the environment.

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So, you're managing their behavior when they're in certain environments. And then you're going to be doing training, starting with [Crate Games](#), ItsYerChoice. Keeping them in an ex-pen so that you can set them up. I like to do three things that are really, really important that I'm teaching early on.

So, Crate Games, ItsYerChoice of course are the foundation for these things. Really, really good recall. Really, really good retrieve. And a really, really good functional relaxation, what we talked about in [podcast episode number 191](#), where we work our dogs through a protocol where they will just chill. They have a trigger that means, "Oh yeah, okay, this is my time to just hang out and chill."



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So those are three things that you really want to intentionally work with your dog. And then the environment that I train the dog in. You've been listening to this podcast you know I've talked about crapper training a lot.

I love, love, love training a dog in the bathroom. Number one, there's not much else for the dog to do other than pay attention to the little crazy little games that I'm playing with them. So, depending on the size of your bathroom, you could do a lot of the foundation for a recall, a retrieve, and relaxation right in the bathroom.

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And when we're outside of the bathroom, especially if you have a puppy, they [don't have free run](#) of the house. Because they're learning to get environmental reinforcements in the bedroom, in the living room. Maybe learning to potty in your bedroom where you aren't. They're learning that, "Oh yeah, it's so much easier. It's snowy, it's raining, I don't want to go outside. I'm just going to pee and poop here."

So crate, an ex-pen and supervision. So, when I'm training them, it's in a bathroom. And then when I get great behaviors there, then I graduate to one of the smallest bedrooms in the house. I get great behaviors there.

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If I go into a bigger room, they might be on a leash, or I might set up a baby gate to make a part of the room. And of course, there's no distraction, so there's no other animals or dogs to distract them. I will intentionally add one dog when I think I've got really good behavior, I'm going to start adding a distraction like a dog in a bed. And work all of those games that we've worked alone.

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We're going to work with a dog in a bed. I've never really done that in a bathroom, but I have done it in the bedroom. And then I work up to the next size room. It might be my kitchen, it might be my living room, wherever you can gradually introduce larger environments and you're going to be aware.

For example, if I throw a retrieve in the living room, and this has happened, my puppy's gone out to get it and then sniffed a spot on the floor. Then they grab the toy, they come back, they play with me. I will then put a bowl of cookies where they sniffed. I might, depending on the age and the stage of learning, I might even put a handful of cookies there.

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"If you wanted to sniff, I'm going to remind you ItsYerChoice is always in play. There's no need to sniff. The environment is neutral, environment means nothing. It's you and me, kid. You and me, we're the ones that are in this together."

So now I've worked up to bigger rooms and I might go to my training building and the first time I go to the training building that dog's on a leash because it's just too big an area.

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And I'm always aware. If I give them freedom in the living room, do they always respond on one cue or do I have to go and interrupt them from something? If I have to go and interrupt them, I am aware consciously that was a fail in this environment. I never want the environment to win, so I'm going to record keep what happened and I'm going to come up with a plan to counter that immediately.



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A lot of reinforcements in the opposition to what happened in the environment that I failed in. It's a really strategic, leveling the playing field so that as that dog grows up, and you can do it now, it doesn't matter the age or stage of your dog, you can start now and [start playing these games](#).

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If you don't know the games, come on over to YouTube. We've got a lot of them there. And if you really want to be coached through this, join one of my programs. Get on the wait list for when they open. So, we're growing the environment only when we're getting great behavior in that environment. You might then go to a dog park, but don't go inside. Here's the greatest thing about dog parks, they all have an outside.

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And you can do like short little retrieves outside the dog park. Do you get the same snappy boom, boom? That's telling you your dog can ignore those other dogs. That's a massive stage. Now you might not be there. You might have to go to the dog park and go across the street and just do tugging on leash. You're going to play these games [strategically growing and neutralizing environments](#) as the dog tells you they're ready for them.

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So, I don't take a puppy and give them free access to my backyard because it's fenced in. Because I don't want massive holes in the backyard, and I don't want them to learn 'there's other things that I can be reinforced by other than you.' I just don't want that. So, I go out to the backyard. We play lots of games of engagement. We play lots of recall games. We play retrieves.

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And when we're walking together, if they want to smell things in the environment, that's fine. I might set them up with a little game of ItsYerChoice on a walk so they learn that 'you don't eat things that you're sniffing on the walk, you're just sniffing for things on the walk.'

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So it's about building teamwork. It's about building focus, trust, and control in small environments. And then you're saying, "I think I've neutralized that environment. I think we're good in the bathroom." At first my puppies leave me in the bathroom to play with the little thing that door stopper, you know. That stops pretty quick. Maybe after the first or second time in a bathroom, they're just all about the work.

And now we've got this great working relationship and we just keep growing the environments, adding a distraction of a dog. I might grow it and add a distraction of somebody playing with another dog. At that stage you know the dog might look but look back to me.

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And I always give a higher reward for an amazing behavior than they ever expected. So, I get a good response, I give a great reinforcement. Remember, negative prediction error. I want them to get a much better reinforcement.

A much better reinforcement might be me taking off screaming and yelling, because that just amps up the reinforcement value. It's all about neutralizing all environments so that your dog always have eyes for you. And it doesn't matter what environment you take them in.



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You have to be patient, you have to be strategic, and you have to keep really good records. The good, the bad, and the ugly. What reinforces your dog? What environments have you neutralized? Where can you take them off leash and where you can't.

Now, does that mean you never take your dog off leash? Well, if I have like a friend over and the dogs want to run around in the backyard and you have a fenced in yard and it's safe, let them have it. Just know you are not going to call the dog unless you're willing to bet me a thousand dollars that the dog will come out of that play. If they won't, just let them have fun.

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And if your dog comes by and looks at you, then go, "Hey, what a good dog!" and reinforce them then and then tell them go play again. So even things like playing with another dog, I will ask the dog to sit. I'll do a collar grab and then I'll say, "Go play." Let them play with the dog. But you want to make sure you're building yourself into all the reinforcement that dog has, so that neutralizing any environment becomes super easy.

I hope this makes sense to you. Please come on over to YouTube. Leave me a comment. Let me know if the power of the environment and how that works against us when we're trying to train our dogs using reinforcement, if you can see that. If you've had an 'Aha!' moment because of something I shared with you here. And if you are over here on YouTube, please like the video.

Love to hear from you. And get ready if you aren't on our list to be invited to our 200th celebration, just check the [link in the show notes](#) or over here on YouTube and you won't want to miss it, I promise it's going to be epic. It's going to be fun, it's going to be enlightening. So many good guests and yeah, prizes. I'll see you next time right here on Shaped by Dog.

Shaped by Dog Episode 200 Online Celebration Event

[Register to get the news to join us for an online party for Episode 200!](#)

Resources

[Podcast Episode 196: Why Mastering Reinforcement Is The Linchpin To Reinforcement Based Dog Training](#)

[Podcast Episode 174: Dopamine In Dog Training: Anticipation, Rewards, And The Transfer Of Value](#)

[Podcast Episode 172: How To Teach Your Dog Anything With My Training Plan](#)

[Podcast Episode 33: How Do I Stop My Dog Counter Surfing?!](#)

[Podcast Episode 162: Dogs Swimming: 5 Must Do Steps For Dogs Who Hate Or Love The Water](#)

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

[YouTube Video: Understanding Your Dog's Reinforcement Zone \(RZ\) with Susan Garrett](#)

[ItsYerChoice Game](#)

[Crate Games Online](#)

[Podcast Episode 191: Get Your Dog To Calm Down With This Common Sense Protocol For Relaxation](#)

[Podcast Episode 166: Puppy Freedom: How Much Is Too Much?](#)

[YouTube Playlist: Dog Training Games with Susan Garrett](#)

[YouTube Video: Training Your Dog In New Places: Create Success With Environmental Manipulation](#)



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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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