

Can Dog Training Be Effective, Efficient AND Compassionate?

Speaker Key

SG Susan Garrett

Transcript

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SG We get a lot of great comments over on our [YouTube channel](#) and my team and I try to answer each and every one of them. But every once in a while, I come across one and think that would be the topic of a great podcast episode and today's the day. And to answer some of this question I decided to quote my mentor Bob Bailey.

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Hi, I'm Susan Garrett. Welcome to Shaped by Dog. And first the question. This is a question posted by Marc Edwards, and it's a rather long question but it's a good one.

Marc asks, *"The point you're making about mindset is spot on. However, dog trainers across the dog training style spectrum clearly underestimate how wildly overwhelming dog training information is to people who don't do it for a living."*

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It's true. I can appreciate that because sometimes those of us who are professionals who've been doing it for 30 years we're too far removed from our beginner days. But ideally, we're coaching people with empathy who are going through their beginner days. Okay. Marc goes on.

"It's hard to know what's right for our dogs, specifically between positive only and balanced training. It's a reality that's almost impossible for a dog trainer to explain without oversimplifying, regardless of where they fall on the spectrum. If those of us want well-trained dogs aren't getting the desired results, how are we to know when to abandon our current training practices or stick with them longer?"

"We have no way of knowing if we stick with what we're doing, an extra week or extra month or years that will achieve the success we're seeking. We also have no way of knowing if our dogs would be more receptive to a different approach."

"But here's the biggest pickle. It's impossible for us to know how much time is actually going to be necessary to make reasonable assessments about the direction to go in. I appreciate you. I'm one of your members as well as a member of a popular balanced training program. All of you seem to care very much about the safety of dogs and the humans they interact with. Thank you for all that you do."

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Well, Marc, thank you for your really rather long and detailed question. And I think that there's a lot of people, I call it 'you've got one foot on the dock and one foot in the boat', and you're trying to train in two different ways, but you're conflicted. You're conflicted because, should I be getting results faster or am I even getting the results that I want?

And I've [said this on this podcast](#) many, many times for me, I want dog training to be compassionate, effective, and efficient.

And compassionate and effective training without being efficient is, might take the lifetime of the dog to teach something very, very simple. But effective and efficient without compassionate, well that's just not an option for me.



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And I would like to think eventually it won't be an option for anybody because it's not just about the relationship that we have with that dog, although I think it's a really important part of it. It's the example that we're setting for maybe children in the house.

It's [an example of how you deal with frustration](#) when things aren't going your way, 'well, I always have that punishment that I can fall back on'. And having recently been on a podcast of a balanced trainer and reading some of his community's comments towards me or about me, I can see why I have left that world.

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Because, and this is a vast generality and I know that there's a lot of lovely people that are in that community. And maybe when somebody challenges you, you lash out in maybe not the best way. But honestly, there were hundreds of incredibly disrespectful comments towards a guest. Like if you truly [understand reinforcement](#), why would you try to barbecue somebody who stepped up and was a guest?

Like, what are the chances you're going to get more reinforcement-based trainers to have a discussion when the community receives that guest with such, I would say abuse in their comments towards me.

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And so, I believe one of the great side effects of training this way is you go through life with a lens of 'am I being judgmental?' You go through life looking for kindness. You go through life looking for ways to reinforce. You aren't looking for a way to punish. It just infiltrates who you are.

Now, I'm not turning this podcast into 'us against them.' To answer to your question, I need to be clear that one of the things that I recognized by being on that podcast is there's so many unbelievable assumptions.

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Like a great assumption is that what we do in the world of reinforcement-based dog training is exactly what they do, but without the punishment. But why would that work? It wouldn't, because that's taking a very important part of their training. And I'm not saying it's the majority. I think really, really good balanced trainers maybe use punishment 5% of the time. I'm guessing. I don't know.

But the vast majority is reinforcement. But they need that punishment, or they wouldn't use it. But there's a lot of us that don't need that punishment. So, there's got to be something missing from the reinforcement that they are doing.

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One of the many great quotes Bob Bailey says is, "To say operant conditioning won't work here, whatever that example of here is, is like saying gravity won't work here." To say there are some dogs that you need to apply operant conditioning [in a different way](#), this doesn't make sense when you can apply it to you know, animals that weigh thousands and thousands of pounds.

So, if we're talking about family pet, I don't want to get into the argument of police dogs or purposely bred protection dogs. Let's just talk family pets. Family pets. Bob Bailey says, "Given enough time, any trainer can teach any behavior using any method to any dog." So that comes back to efficiency. Because given enough time, any method will work.



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Knowing that, you can keep pushing forward with whatever you're doing. I would say though, if you're not getting results, then you need to take a step back and evaluate what you're doing. It doesn't need to mean that you have to change your methodology. Because I don't. I'm still training in a [reinforcement-based program](#).

Now, I don't want people to split hairs and say, "Oh it's not all positive because you know, when you withhold cookies, yada, yada, yada, yada—" The intention is that we are not using verbal corrections or physical corrections. That we're not using any kind of aversives in our training.

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That's the difference. And so, if you believe like I believe that dogs are always doing the best they can with the education they've been given in the environment we've put them in, then it's simple to figure out a problem. If your dog doesn't do what you expected, then you've got to look at the education you've given them or the environment that you've put them in.

And it isn't as simple as it's always operant conditioning because there's [far more things at play](#) than just operant conditioning. And another great quote from Bob Bailey is, "Animal training fails because people expect way too much of their animal and way too little of themselves." I made a comment on a balanced trainer's Facebook page a few weeks ago and I asked, "When would you feel that you needed to use an electric collar on a dog that you've raised from a puppy yourself or on a dog that you've adopted as a rescue dog?"

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And most of the common things were when the dog won't do as I say [under distraction](#) that they won't hold a down or they won't come when they're called. And I mean, I didn't want conflict. I was just looking for information but my question reading that was, "Why don't I need that? If my dog didn't hold a down under distraction, I would just look at where is the flaw in my training program."

And not only would that serve the dog, it would serve me for all of the dogs that I have to train moving forward for the rest of my life. And so, I think for me, I love to learn. I love to get new ways of going.

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And Marc you say in this question here, "If those of us that want well-trained dogs aren't getting our desired results." Bob Bailey says the difference between a great trainer and a good trainer are the words 'good enough'.

So somewhere along the relationship you have with the dog, if you aren't getting those great results potentially subconsciously or otherwise, the words 'good enough' have crept into the protocol somewhere.

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Because another great line Bob says is, and it's true, "Behavior is a function of consequence." What you're seeing has been reinforced somewhere else. What you're seeing is being reinforced. And you just need to figure out is what the dog doing, getting reinforcement in a way that's contrary to what you're doing?

And I'll give you an example that was given to me on this podcast that when the gentleman says, gives his dog a cue to heel, the dog can stay in heel position for like one or two steps and then go off and sniff.



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Now for me, if I asked my dog to do something, come into heel position and my cue would be 'with me' for an informal walk beside me. And my dog wouldn't wander off because that would be gaining reinforcement for doing something in opposition to what I asked you to do.

And so, knowing how [reinforcing sniffing](#) would be for my dog, I might have them walk in with me position or whatever, one step, five steps, ten minutes. And then I would say, [give them the release word](#) that they could, if I knew sniffing was very, very high value, I would say go sniff or go for a run or go play if there was another dog there, maybe go see if there was a person.

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I would intentionally know, I would be aware of what it is that is reinforcing my dog, and I would give them access to that reinforcement as a release for hanging out in [Reinforcement Zone](#).

But if my dog just leaves when they want, they're taking the reinforcement that it's not contingent on me or any behavior, which means yeah, maybe you might need more punishment in your life because of that.

Or you need at least, matching law tells us you need at least the same value or greater for hanging out beside you. And if getting out in the environment and sniffing actually has a higher intensity of value, then you need a lot more reinforcements for hanging out beside you.

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So definitely, this is a personal question at this time, but I don't think any of us has the right to say, "I've put in a little work and now you deserve to be punished for the performance that I've trained you to do because I don't like that performance."

Does that make sense? I think the lines are so blurry and each camp can make a good story because we're all looking through the lens of our own beliefs.

The belief over here is that aversives are a part of nature and so therefore we are allowed to use them. But I think parenting believed aversives were a part of nature therefore spare the rod, spoil the child. That mentality is gone by the wayside thankfully.

And I believe it should be gone by the wayside for any relationship with any animal. And in particular one that we share our lives with and care so much about.

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And so, how do you know? I think Marc, you've got to ask yourself, "What feels right in my heart?" And, "Am I following the right mentor to get me the answers that I need?"

And if you are in a program, if you are in one of our programs and you aren't progressing at the speed that you think you should, then I can promise you it will come down to your mechanics or the other 23 hours of the day.

So, what happens, because all consequences are there as a result of reinforcement. What reinforcement is in your dog's life that you either aren't aware of or you haven't felt the need to be in control of?

If things are working in opposition to what you're trying to create in training, then training is going to be inefficient and very slow and you might wonder, "What else could I do with this dog?"





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So, a great mentor and a system that you believe in your heart resonates with the kind of person that you want to be and the kind of relationship you want to have, both with your dog and with anybody else in your life. I hope this makes sense and I hope I answered your question well enough Marc. And any of you, if you have questions, jump over to YouTube and leave them.

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And while you're there, please, if you give us a thumbs up, it goes a long way to help spread the word of what we're doing to other dog lovers just like yourself. And while you're over there, be sure to subscribe and hit the notification bell. I'll see you next time right here on Shaped by Dog.

Resources:

[DogsThat YouTube Channel](#)

[Podcast Episode 185: I Tried That, It Didn't Work](#)

[Podcast Episode 195: Making Your Mind Your Most Powerful Dog Training Tool](#)

[YouTube Playlist: Reinforcement, Permissions and Transfer of Value in Dog Training](#)

[Podcast Episode 193: Do Different Dogs Really Need Different Dog Training Methods?](#)

[YouTube Playlist: Mastery of Positive Reinforcement Based Dog Training](#)

[YouTube Playlist: Susan Garrett's Dog Training Philosophy and Training Processes](#)

[Podcast Episode 197: Outsmarting Distractions: How To Use Environmental Reinforcement in Dog Training](#)

[Podcast Episode 74: Yes, Susan Garrett's Dogs Sniff On Walks](#)

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

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



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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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