

The Hidden World Of Reinforcement For Dogs And Why You Need To Know

Speaker Key

SG Susan Garrett

Transcript

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If you've been watching this podcast, then you likely have heard me say, "In order to become <u>great at reinforcement-based dog training</u>, you really have to get great at the use of reinforcement." And today by golly, by the end of this, I hope you are all great at understanding reinforcement because today is all about the hidden world of what is reinforcing our dogs and why it's important that each of us are aware of it.

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Hi, I'm Susan Garrett. Welcome to Shaped by Dog. And when you think of reinforcement-based dog training, most people think of food, giving a dog a cookie. "Oh, no, no, no Susan, I like to throw a ball for my dog or maybe I'll tug with my dog." Yes, so there's three of the katrillion of different ways that a dog might be getting reinforced.

And today's podcast is all about shining a light on, not only what reinforces the dog, but how that reinforcement can increase in value to the dog. Because in each of our dogs' world, there is reinforcement that helps them be closer to us and be more aligned with what we want to do the things that we'd like to see them do. And there's also reinforcement for them that gives them value to do things that we don't want them to do.

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And here's the most important thing. Reinforcement by definition is something that the dog wants at the time that they're getting it, and when it is reinforcing it increases the likelihood that they're going to do the behavior they were doing at the time they got the reinforcement.

So, reinforcement just to be clear is not what you think your dog would like.

"Oh, I'm going to buy them this really cute, squeaky monkey because I really think my dog would like this squeaky monkey." Your dog will tell you, your dog may not like that squeaky monkey at that time, doesn't mean that they'll never like it. Likewise, the reinforcement isn't what you think your dog should like or what you'd really like your dog to like. It's all about what the dog loves, when.

So today we're going to look at several different things, because there are multipliers. So, it's what your dog finds reinforcing, when they find it reinforcing, where they find it reinforcing, and maybe another qualifier would be, with whom would they find it reinforcing.

So, the what is reinforcing, it could be kind of obvious, but I've got a long list I want to go over. But I want you to be really intentional about this because the 'where' and the 'when' and the 'with whom' is so important.

When you're trying to train your dog without the use of physical corrections, without the use of verbal intimidation or verbal punishment, then you really have to get good at realizing what is reinforcing the dog, when, and where.

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So, let's think about the 'what.' And if you're going, "Well, I don't get this." Let me just give you a simple example. Let's say what is reinforcing is your dog, they see a mouse, they love to chase a mouse. So,





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when is that reinforcing? It doesn't matter. They could be sound asleep, if they see a mouse, they're chasing it.

The where, let's say it's in your yard, it's in your kitchen they see a mouse, they're gone. And what if there's another dog in the room? And the other dog wants to chase it, too. Well, that just amplifies it, doesn't it? Because it kicks in the prey drive for both dogs. They're both in the hunt.

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Now, what if it's the same mouse but there's no other dog around? "Oh yeah, my dog's still going to want to chase it." Will they be as intense? Not likely. So that presence of the other dog partaking in the chase is a multiplier to the reinforcement value of chasing. Now what if the 'where' is different instead of being in your living room or in your backyard, what if the mouse is in the crate that the dog is in? All of a sudden, "Wait what? Get it out!"

A lot of dogs are going to go, "I don't want to chase it. Get it out of here! I don't want, get me out. Get it out, get something out!" It's a big deal. So, I want to go through each one of these examples with you today and help you to see how just some small tweaks to what you're doing could have a massive amplification in the results that you're getting.

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So, let's first jump into the 'what.' So, the first category of what might be reinforcing, I'm going to go with food, things that the animal eats. And number one on the list, I'm going to go from like lower value to higher value.

And this list is going to be something that you're going to have to individualize, but on all dogs' lists you should have the word water because water will be reinforcing to your dog, and you might want to use it as a reinforcement.

Now, I'm not saying you withhold water when your dog needs it. I'm saying you're out for a hike, you call your dog over, they come over, you pour them a bowl of water and say, "You want a drink? Here's a drink." Reinforce it for coming when called, "I got a drink for you." So, water could be very, very reinforcing, but for some dogs it depends on the time.

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In the middle of winter, they maybe aren't that thirsty, so they don't really care so it's not going to be a big deal. You call them and they come, you give them water, they're going to go, "What are you kidding? Really?" So, it's the knowing 'when is this a value.'

Now, if I'm at an agility trial with my dogs, I might put a little bit of yogurt, maybe a little bit of honey, and mix that up because that makes the water more reinforcing. It makes them more likely to drink. And when they're competing at an event all day, I really want them to drink water.

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So, water's always at the top of the list and water mixed with something else. But I would say that a dry reinforcer like a dry cookie, maybe kibble if you're a kibble feeder, that would potentially be a low value reinforcement for most dogs.

And then you might go up to something like a homemade tuna brownie or any kind of homemade, semi-moist treat might be slightly higher than that dry kibble, the dry treat that you're feeding. And then you might go to something like meat, like chicken or roast beef that's going to be likely higher than your semi-moist cookie.





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Then you might go to something even higher than that would be like sardine right out of a can. Eww, I don't know how you're going to feed that, but that's up to you but your dog will find it very, very reinforcing if you're going to use it as a training reinforcement. And anything with tripe in it, tripe treats my dogs go crazy for.

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You mix those things. Like water isn't that reinforcing, water with yogurt and honey, very reinforcing. Beef may or may not be crazy, but something like honey beefers. Yeah, my dogs love those honey beefers. So, it amplifies the value of the beef alone.

So, you would just keep going up this what your dog eats to what is the top of the list for your dog. Now for my dogs, it's anything with tripe. Smells disgusting, but they love it.

Now, a second cousin to food might be things that your dog loves to chew. So it could be like a plastic bone, all the way up to like a meaty bone, or my dogs' favorite is like a stuffed <u>Toppl</u> with their food and maybe pieces of tracheas sticking out of it.

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So, there'd be a bunch of things in between. Depending on what I'm training, I will put lower or higher value things for the dog to chew. So that is reinforcement, chewing things that I'd like to see them chew. Like the bottom would be an empty Kong with nothing in it or one of those plastic chews like a Nylabone that is meant for chewing. And then it would go up to meaty bone, a stuffed Toppl with fun things sticking out to make it exciting.

So those are things that the animal wouldn't eat. Now, that list could be miles long. Vegetables would be on there, fruit would be on there. That's all reinforcing but it may not have the same reinforcement value.

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And what's important is that you recognize that you don't need super high value reinforcement every single time you train. And if you use super high value reinforcement every time you train your dog might not want to eat the regular meals.

So, you're going to mix that up and only use that super high reinforcement at times when you have super high distractions. So that is what the dog could eat in training. But then the next category of reinforcement would be the interaction with you.

So even just looking at your dog, that acknowledgement is very reinforcing. Your eye contact is very reinforcing. So, if for example your dog is going to lunge and bite somebody, if you turned away from them, there's a very high probability they're not going to do it.

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Now, you may not want to take that chance. But I've had people whose dogs were in a house and going to bite. I've said to them, just turn your back to me, face the wall, those dogs never bit me.

So, eye contact is super powerful. So, if you're staring at your dog and you don't want them to do something, chances are you're actually reinforcing them because you're giving them your attention.

That likewise is your talk. So, if you know your dog's doing something that's annoying you and you yell at them, that's attention. So, it may be interrupting the behavior, so it stops for a second, but it's also reinforcing the behavior because they are getting your attention. So, recognizing those roles, you are





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growing a behavior you may not want to see be grown, and that's why it's important that you understand how reinforcement works.

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So just a look, a look and any interaction vocally from you, and even if it's scolding, which I hope you're not doing if you're watching this podcast or listening to this podcast, but talking. If you're listening to this, I bet you're like me, crazy dog lady, we talk to our dogs, it's reinforcing. So just make sure that they're doing something that is really something you want to be reinforced.

Half the time, my dogs are doing nothing except going, "Why are you talking to me? I'm trying to have a nap." So, talking to the dogs, you're touching the dog when you're patting them, when you're giving them scrinches or when you are snuggling with dogs who like to snuggle. Remember, it's not what you find reinforcing, it's what the dog finds reinforcing.

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So, interaction from being excited, like having the dog chase you and having the dog jump on you, that's interaction, to just chillaxing somewhere curled up that you know, my dogs all love to get massaged. So, after I train them, often I will lay them down and just massage them. They love, love, love that.

So, interaction with you could take on weird forms like Swagger loves to hold a toy and watch me train other dogs. That's a weird interaction with me but it's obviously very reinforcing to him because chances are, if you've watched any of our YouTube videos, you've seen Swagger in a lot of different positions holding a toy.

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Also, things like removing the dog's leash. Remember, reinforcement isn't just what we think of as positive reinforcement. It could be negative reinforcement, which means the dog doesn't really like what's going on and therefore when that stops, you are reinforcing what the dog did when you stopped it.

So, if they are pulling on leash because they want to get out to swim and they're pulling and choking and pulling and choking and you take off the leash, you just rewarded something you may not want to see repeated which is pulling on a leash.

Likewise, if your dog has got like a <u>head halter</u> on and they're rolling on the ground and they're pawing at it and you take it off, you just reinforced. You're going to get more. That's how reinforcement works, even if it's negative reinforcement, it works just as well as positive reinforcement.

So, we generally don't think of what we're reinforcing when we take off a leash or release the dog from confinement.

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If the dog is not crazy about what's going on, "I don't like wearing this coat," and you take it off when they're barking or pawing or bouncing off of you, then make sure you recognize you're going to get more of that. So negative reinforcement, the dog has to find displeasure in what's going on and when you stop the displeasure you've reinforced what they were doing.

So that's a kind of interaction, but just one you have to be aware of, not necessarily one I would like you to use. Because negative reinforcement can also be you are scolding a dog until they stop what you're doing, and then you stop scolding them and they go, "Oh great."





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So, they might get what people call a guilty look because you're scolding them and people go, "Aha, he knows what I mean. He's bad." No, he doesn't. He's just creating this appearement look to get you to stop scolding and that appearement look works because you will walk away and leave them alone.

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Alright, so negative reinforcement, it's still reinforcing to the dog and you're still reinforcing something, you just have to be aware. It's not something that I would encourage you to use other than use it like if I'm going to let my dog off leash near the beach, they're going to maybe sit in Reinforcement Zone, I take the leash off and then I might ask them to down or spin and then they can go for a swim. So, I'm building value through me into taking that leash off.

Okay, so that's eating and that's interaction. Now another form of interaction is the dog chasing you. But I'm going to make that a category all of its own.

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So, what are things that the dog likes to chase? When they're puppies of course they like to chase leaves, don't they? Novel things that are catching in the wind. A butterfly, flies, bees. Most dogs will outgrow that. Tater Salad has quite not done that yet. So, they grow to maybe chasing birds, or maybe chasing reptiles because if you live in areas that have a lot of lizards, a lot of dogs like to chase those things.

Some dogs like to chase shadows, reflections of, if you wear a wristwatch or, please don't do this, some people get a laser pointer, and they get their dogs to chase that. Oh, nay nay on the laser pointer. Very, very dangerous thing. I would never do that with a dog. The chance for it to become an obsession is just way too high. So many other things to get your dog to chase, get yourself a flirt pole. Do not get your dog to chase a laser pointer.

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So, we've got chasing birds. We've got chasing a flirt pole. We've got chasing birds. We've got chasing skateboarders. I'm not saying we're using these as reinforcement, I'm saying dogs get reinforcement even if they're just barking and lunging at them. That is a mini chase. That is them chasing, that is getting reinforcement for a behavior.

Because the car or skateboard or bike goes away, which reinforces the behavior of lunging at them to get them to go away. Of course, most dogs like to chase small critters. So, mice, bunnies, squirrels, chipmunks, whatever critters you have in your area.

And some like to chase bigger critters like deer or bear or kangaroos. We don't have them, somebody else does. But whatever you have in your area, they may or may not like to chase the bigger things as well.

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They are getting reinforcement and sometimes it's getting reinforcement for ignoring your, "Please come back here and don't chase that thing." So, it's really important, them going when you say come and them getting to chase something is reinforcing. What's the multiplier? What if they catch it? That's a huge multiplier.

So, chasing other dogs, chasing cats, we don't want that either. Chasing you. As I said, chasing a flirt pole, chasing a dragged toy that you're dragging behind, those are some good things. So, there are a





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lot of good things, but dogs just love to chase, and you need to recognize when that is reinforcing something.

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Now, do I get bent out of shape when a puppy chases a leaf? No, I mean, that's a puppy being a puppy. They grow out of that really quick. But the rest of the things really you want to manipulate your environment so that the chase is things that are appropriate that can help build behaviors, not things that are going to tear down behaviors.

And finally, kind of a catchall is activity. Activities that dogs love to do. So, your dog likes to walk on leash. Your dog likes to walk off leash.

So, hiking off leash would maybe be more valuable than walking in an area, like being able to run and jump off leash. That's a higher reinforcement to most dogs than walking on a leash or walking beside you off leash.

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That could go up to going for a car ride or going for a swim, or some dogs like to skateboard, or some dogs like to surf. What is the activities that your dog loves to do? Some dogs, they get huge value from greeting other dogs or greeting other people, or fence fighting with other dogs.

Have you seen the clip on YouTube with two dogs fighting on either side of a gate and the gate opens and they stop? Like, "Hey, what are you doing?" "I wasn't doing nothing." And then the gate closes again and "I hate you!" "And I hate you!" When the door opens again, "Yeah. What are you going to do tonight?" "I don't know, kickback, watch tv." The door closes, "wwaaa!" right.

So that shows that game of fence fighting is very reinforcing to dogs, and it can escalate, so it's not something that I really would encourage you to ever let your dog do.

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Things like shredding, digging, destroying. Right? Chewing to bits. Those are activities that dogs may find reinforcing. Rolling in stuff. The smellier the better for most dogs. Rolling in mud, a lot of dogs like to roll in mud or lie down in puddles.

They like to of course retrieve things for you. If ideally that's something that you've trained, but they find that very engaging, very reinforcing.

So, retrieving or tugging. Or some dogs love going on a treadmill or a slat mill and just running like cray cray on that.

Some dogs like to hang from a rope in a tree, right? My Terriers used to love that. Just go crazy hanging from a rope in a tree. Running could be like skijoring or cycling with you or going out jogging with you. Maybe they're mushing.

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What about sports? Running, jumping, chasing, biting, hunting. Hunting is very big. It doesn't even have to be an organized sport. Most dogs love to stalk, or hunt, track down prey, real or imaginary.

What about the activity of breeding a bitch? Most male dogs really find that reinforcing. So, whenever I've had a stud dog, I've always used the act of breeding as a big reinforcement. So, the dog did a behavior and then they got to go and breed the bitch. So huge, huge reinforcement that I've always used to my advantage.



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So, there's a sampling of possible 'what's' for your dog. What's really important is for you to become aware of what is it that A, you can use in training for your dog, or B, that your dog is getting reinforcement for activities you don't want to see and that you're going to change that, <u>manipulate the antecedent</u> so that either it doesn't happen, or it happens in a way that reinforces something you'd like to see reinforced.

So next is the 'when' and why is it important that you know the when? Because you would know that my dog is really keen to do something in these examples. So that's the time where you would start to introduce more training. If the dog really doesn't like to do anything like just before bedtime, then you wouldn't be doing training then.

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So, what are those times? Like when you first get home from work, your dog or puppy is really very excited and engaged and ready to go. After a bath or after they've been swimming, they're a little bit cray cray, aren't they? So, you can engage them in something like that. When it's super, super hot out, they might be less wanting to chase you, but they may be more wanting to do retrieving from the pond or the pool.

What about when a dog is tired or when a dog is hungry, or when a dog is over hungry or overtired? These are times that you need to know to either not train or to adjust something and then train, right?

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We all, as people, we have different things. Like if somebody phoned you at two o'clock in the morning and said, "Hey, hey, bud. What are you doing?" "Well, it's two o'clock in the morning. I'm sleeping." "Yeah. Do you want to go out clubbing?" "Yeah, no, that's not something I want to do."

Well, what if they phoned you and they said, "Hey, what are you doing?" "Oh, it's two o'clock." [I don't know why they sound like a Northern Ontario or Newfoundlander. I don't know why all of a sudden, my characters sound like a Newfoundlander], but they say, "Hey, what are you doing?" And you go, "Uh-uh, it's two o'clock in the morning, I'm sleeping."

They go, "Hey, I heard that Susan Garrett is doing like this free dog training session where you could bring your dog in. She would actually train it and it's happening like two doors down from your place. Uh, you want to go?" "Yeah, I think I might want to go."

So, the 'when' maybe a definite no, but there could be some instances when it's not and same with your dog. You need to know what that looks like. So dog may love to go out and train, but if it's pouring rain, a dog like Tater absolutely does not want to go out to do anything. On a snowy day he's more likely to go out. So, my dogs love going running in the snow.

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So, the when: when you first get home, when you first get up, on the time of day, the conditions of the day, if it's super hot, if it's super cold, if it's super windy. How does that affect your dog's willingness to want to train with you and how can you make that to your advantage knowing, "My dog isn't really motivated by training but these are the times when he's crazy." Or, "My dog's crazy about training but these are the times that he's more chill."

So, think about that when you're training because the when could be a multiplier for your reinforcement.





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Now the 'where.' Training your dog in your crate playing Crate Games. Yep, you get a certain amount of enthusiasm and comfort with that. Same with doing it in your living room or your bedroom or different rooms in your house versus out in your backyard versus at a bunny farm. So, the 'where' you're going to have more success knowing when your dog is ready for bigger 'where's.'

So, what about training outside of a kid's school, or you're training outside of a dog park, or you're training at the beach? Where will you not have any success? So don't go there.

Go to the places you will have success. Likely they start around your home, which is why online training is really a great idea for everybody. Then you're going to grow that to the periphery of your home. Sitting in your front yard or your backyard or your neighbor's yard. Or then going to a quiet park, going to a busier park, knowing the where of where that success ends and how you're going to strategize that so that you will get more success.

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And this is super important for those of you who want to compete in a sport. Because what does your dog train like at home? What does your dog train like at a training class? What does your dog train like at a competition? How well do the behaviors hold up at a competition?

Well, there are big multipliers for dogs at trials because they're a little bit more excited. You're a little nervous. They get excited. They learn that they don't have to sit when you ask them to sit at a trial because you're just going to go.

So, the where right now, where is your training it's best and where do you need work on that training? And you think about just a graph, and if you have what the dog values on one side of the graph and you have distractions that will overpower your dog on the other.

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And if you start like this distraction is a zero. And so, you can use a lower value reinforcement in that environment. So, if it's a I'm training in my backyard, then the value of the distractions might just be like a one or two.

But I'm training within my backyard and the squirrels are out so that distraction has gone from a two to probably like a five or six, so you no longer can use just you know level one, two, or three reinforcements, you've got to go up to the level six, seven, and eight reinforcements.

So, it's a direct relation between the value of the rewards you want to use and the value of the environment to your dog, because that environment is a distraction. And here's the thing, I can't say this is a hundred percent sure, but if we exclude fear as a distraction, things that your dog might be startled by or afraid of, every distraction is a reinforcement.

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So, to your dog, you might not want to use it. You might not want your dog chasing the guy on the bicycle. It's a distraction to your dog because your dog finds it reinforcing in some way. And so, in order to compete with the level of distraction that you're faced with, you've got to have success in lower-level environments and then as you go to higher, more distracting environments, raise that value of the reinforcement you're using.

Now how are we going to exponentially raise some reinforcement movement? So, asking your dog to tug with the squirrels in the backyard might be better than giving them cheerios. But getting your dog to





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chase a flirt pole will be exponentially better. Because they're catching it, they're tugging, but the movement of the flirt pole will be better to distract your dog in the environment with those squirrels.

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And the with who, as I mentioned, is if your partner, your spouse is around, your kids are around, if strangers are around. Like Tater Salad gets so distracted by people he doesn't know, far easier with the people he does know. Or if there's other dogs around.

What else is in that environment is the 'with who.' If you're training at the bunny farm and you're with the bunnies, that is a big distraction. So is it sometimes training with the dog, the dog's more likely to be successful because that might be <u>an anchor dog</u> that helps grow your dog's confidence in a different environment.

So, it's really all about knowing what is reinforcing, when is it most reinforcing, where is it most reinforcing, what can you do to exponentially change that reinforcement by coupling or putting motion to it. Sound is another one that could exponentially reinforce. That's why squeaky toys are so exciting for dogs. And with whom is that reinforcing.

When you're aware of that my friend, you are ready to have massive leaps in your success with training your dog in a reinforcement-based system. I'll see you next time right here on Shaped by Dog.

Resources:

Podcast Episode 196: Why Mastering Reinforcement Is The Linchpin To Reinforcement Based Dog Training

Podcast Episode 197: Outsmarting Distractions: How To Use Environmental Reinforcement in Dog Training

Tasty Treats Recipes eBook

West Paw Toppl Treat Toys

Kong Toys

YouTube Playlist: Loose Leash Walking with Susan Garrett

Podcast Episode 40: Using A Head Halter On A Dog, Why My Approach Is So Different

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

<u>Podcast Episode 24: Help for Dogs who Chase Chipmunks, Bicycles, and Neighbor's Cats (Distraction Intensity Index)</u>

Podcast Episode 154: Car Vacations With Dogs: Tips To Make Holiday Road Trips Safe And Fun For All

Podcast Episode 162: Dogs Swimming: 5 Must Do Steps For Dogs Who Hate Or Love The Water

Podcast Episode 127: Puppy Socialization: Playtime For Puppies And Permissions

Podcast Episode 121: How To Stop Dogs Jumping Up On People

Podcast Episode 88: Barrier Frustration: Help for Fence Fighting, Leash Reactivity and Window Guarding

Podcast Episode 42: Behavior Chains: Are You Teaching Your Dog to be Bad to be Good?

Crate Games Online

Podcast Episode 172: How To Teach Your Dog Anything With My Training Plan

Podcast Episode 111: How An Anchor Dog Can Help Overcome Your Dog's Anxiety Or Reactivity





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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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