

What Was That Cookie For?! When Positive Reinforcement In Dog Training Goes Wrong

Speaker Key

SG Susan Garrett

Transcript

00:00:00

With a growing popularity of reinforcement-based dog training, there's an increasing popularity of criticizing [reinforcement-based dog training](#). And truthfully, it isn't all unfounded because there is a huge variability in the results people are getting using reinforcement-based dog training, AKA people choosing not to physically correct or use verbal intimidation in their dog training.

So, why would we have that? That is the topic of today's episode, and I'm going to share with you one question that can turn it all around.

00:00:42

Hi, I'm Susan Garrett. Welcome to Shaped by Dog. And with any kind of dog training, there are variables that affect the effectiveness of what we're doing. Number one is the methodology itself, which I happen to think the reinforcement-based dog training that myself, and all of my students apply has an amazing track record of success.

It could be the methodology people are choosing. It could be their application of the methodology. Potentially [their mentor](#) has amazing success with every dog they've ever trained but your application of it, possibly the way it was taught to you or the way that you express that teaching is flawed.

00:01:20

And it also could just be human error. All of the above could have a human error factor. So, that one question I talked about that could change everything. I believe if everybody, when they are reinforcing their dog, asked this question, sincerely ask this question, it could change everything. And that is ['What was that cookie for?'](#)

And when I say 'cookie', I mean anything that reinforces the dog. So, for the sake of this episode, I'm going to use 'cookie' as anything that your dog finds reinforcing. 'What was that cookie for?' And that comes back to when I was teaching in Hawaii many years ago and I was teaching [ItsYerChoice](#), a very fundamental game of our program.

00:02:03

And for those of you who don't know it, part of ItsYerChoice is you have a handful of food, you go to pick up a cookie to feed the dog, and if the dog moves in to try and steal the cookie, you put the cookie back in your hand and close your hand.

Now, at the end of it, I was asking if there's any questions or comments and one man who'd been watching all day he said, "I noticed that when you're training other people's dogs, you're always looking for a choice to reinforce. And it looks like most of these other participants are just looking for an excuse to feed their dog."

00:02:34

And therein lies the question, what choice did you reinforce? If you remember in [podcast episode number 174, 175, and 176](#), I spoke about the [dopamine release](#) and its effect on learning and how it can make learning addictive, but it requires a choice point in the training. So not all reinforcement-based dog training allows for a choice point in dog training, AKA [gives that dog a choice](#).



What Was That Cookie For?! When Positive Reinforcement In Dog Training Goes Wrong

00:03:02

So sometimes just the presentation of the reinforcement is reinforcing a choice, and you may not realize it. So, in the case of teaching ItsYerChoice when I would see that dog come forward, I was taking the cookie, putting it back in my hand, not allowing the choice to carry on, when I saw that choice was made that was a good one, I brought the cookie forward and fed the dog.

Where what many of the other people watching did is they picked up the cookie, if the dog rushed in, they closed their hand preventing the dog from stealing as they shoved the cookie in the mouth of the dog because what they really wanted was to finish the exercise.

00:03:40

You get so focused on the completion of something. You don't take the time to recognize what did I just reinforce? What did that cookie teach the dog? What was I reinforcing with that cookie? And so, I'm going to share with you five different scenarios.

And I want you to think about what did that cookie AKA reinforcement really reinforce? I want you to think about something that maybe people don't think about in that how did the trainer or the owner of the dog get reinforced in this situation?

00:04:13

Okay, my five scenarios. First one, a person is sound asleep, it's five o'clock in the morning, all of a sudden there's a wet nose up against their cheek, kind of punching them in the cheek. "Hey, hey, hey, are you awake?" And then the wet nose is preceded by a little yip, paw of the paw, and finally the owner gets out of bed, lets the dog outside.

While the dog's outside, they prepare their breakfast, give them their breakfast, and then they go back to bed. That is scenario number one. I want you to think about what just got reinforced and how did it reinforce the dog owner?

00:04:45

Because reinforcement builds behavior, my friends, both in the dogs and in us. Scenario number two, the dog is in class. Another dog and handler go by, and the other handler is really exciting. So, the dog lunges to the end of the leash.

Owner grabs out a cookie, puts it on the end of the dog's nose, tries to get the dog back, dog is not interested. Gets a bigger cookie out, a bigger meatball, something higher value, sticks it on the ends of the dog's nose. The dog finally comes back and gets that bigger meatball.

00:05:15

Now, later on in the class, the same dog and handler walk by, and the dog goes to move forward, but then comes back on their own and the owner does nothing. What choice got reinforced and what could have got reinforced?

Scenario number three. Let's go to the agility world where a dog is a little bit not so confident in this environment. They're not going their fastest. They get to jump number three. They go around the jump and the owner tries to bring them back to the correct side and the dog just slows right down and starts sniffing.

So, then the owner wants the dog to feel great, starts cajoling them, "Attaboy, attaboy! Come on you can do this!", gets the dog to get their head off the ground, gets them to go over the jump.



What Was That Cookie For?! When Positive Reinforcement In Dog Training Goes Wrong

00:05:57

The dog gets going a little bit and then the handler just keeps going all the way around the course. The dog is doing everything for the next 15 obstacles, but the handler stops cheering. What gets reinforced? Why is this reinforcing to the handler? What could have been reinforced?

Scenario number four, [your dog is off leash](#). Let's say you just let the dog off leash to have a pee. You want to go back in the house. You call the dog, dog starts sniffing. You don't even get the head lifting up. You call them again. You get nothing. You squeak a squeaky. Dog puts his head up, comes running. You get the dog to you. You give them a cookie. What gets reinforced? How did that reinforce you?

00:06:34

Okay and my final scenario. You're walking your dog at the park. The dog spots a big fountain with all these dogs playing in it. And he's like, "Yeah, baby!" He starts [pulling on his leash](#) towards that. So, you start running to help them get there faster and you can't keep up with this dog.

So, then you stop, you take the leash off, and you let the dog go. What gets reinforced, what gets reinforced in you and what was that cookie for?

00:06:59

"Well, Susan, where was the cookie? I didn't see the cookie." So, before we can answer that question 'what was that cookie for?', we really have to be aware of 'what is reinforcing your dog?'. So, I've asked you this before, now's the time to do that homework. I want you to sit down and write a list of what is your dog's most [favorite food rewards](#).

And maybe your second and third favorites, like what are your dog's top three food rewards. Number two, what's your dog's absolute [favorite toys](#)? And there might be different situations. Like maybe they like you running away with a toy or maybe they like a toy that is interactive or makes a lot of noise. So, what are your dog's three favorite toys?

00:07:38

Number three, reinforcement is [permission and access](#). So, what does your dog love. For example, going for a swim or going to play with their friends in the backyard or going for a walk. Access, out of their crate, going to visit people, going to greet somebody at the door, access and permissions. What are your dog's big, big, big ones that they go crazy about?

Reinforcement number four. What are your dog's [favorite activities](#)? So going for a walk, hanging out with you, going to the beach, going in the conservation area, [playing agility](#), playing fly ball. What are your dog's favorite activities?

00:08:19

And number five, how are you giving your dog attention that is reinforcing? Could be looking at the dog, talking to the dog, patting the dog, scratching the dog, even just pushing the dog away sometimes, that's reinforcing. So how is your attention reinforcing the dog?

So, there's five categories of reinforcement. I'm calling them all a 'cookie'. What was that cookie for? Now I want you to think about when you give a dog a reinforcement, any one of those five from the categories that I mentioned, I want you to think about this. You are telling your dog 'What you're doing right now, I absolutely love, and I hope you do more of that in the future.'



What Was That Cookie For?! When Positive Reinforcement In Dog Training Goes Wrong

00:09:00

That's what reinforcement does. You're saying to your dog, "It's a good day. I'm glad you did this. Here's your reinforcement. Let's hope I get more of that behavior." All right. Keeping that in mind, let's go back to our examples.

Number one, somebody's sleeping in bed. The dog starts poking their nose in your face. You get up, let them outside and feed them. What did you just reinforce? Well, clearly you might think, "You know, the dog needed to go outside and so while I was up, I just fed them." Why did you feed them? Because you knew if you didn't feed them, you could go back to bed and your dog would still keep bothering you.

00:09:32

And so how does feeding them their breakfast help you? Well, you get to sleep in after you've given them the breakfast. But what did you reinforce? You're saying to your dog, "I love it when you wake me up at o'dark o'clock. I'm hoping tomorrow you could do it at 3:30 instead of 5." Reinforcement builds behavior, my friend. What did your cookie reinforce?

Scenario number two. Dogs in class, you try to call their name. And then they ignore you, you put a cookie on their nose, they ignore that, you give them a bigger, higher value meatball, and then they come to that. What did you reinforce? Well, several things. Number one, 'ignore me'.

00:10:09

'If you hear your name and you want to look and do something else, just ignore me.' Number two, 'If you don't like the reward I'm offering you, hold out, I'll get you something better.' And worst of all, when that dog and handler walk by again and your dog made a brilliant choice of seeing the dog but deciding not to go in hopes of maybe getting that big meatball, that was a time to give the big meatball. Do not pass up the opportunity to catch your dog doing something amazing.

Scenario number three, our dog is doing agility, [maybe a little timid](#), telling me maybe your training wasn't as good as you think it was. And they go around a jump, you bring them back and then they slow right down, and they start sniffing.

00:10:50

Then you turn on the 'attaboy', 'you're a good dog', 'this is amazing.' Your attention, your praise, your talking, your excitement level, all is reinforcing what the dog is doing at the time they hear it. 'Yeah, go around more jumps and just ignore me and go off and do something else.'

Now, I'm not discounting that sniffing might be the dog exhibiting a sign of stress and trying to give you a calming signal. The point is the dog wasn't ready for agility and the handler kept going because they wanted to finish agility. And when the dog finally got going, that's the time to turn on the cheer and go, "You're doing so well! This is amazing!"

00:11:28

Scenario number four, you let your dog off leash. You call them, they don't come, they start sniffing. You squeak the squeaky, they turn around and come, and you feed them. You might say, "Hey, I just, I gave them a cookie. The cookie rewarded them for coming. End of story."

Okay, let's take a step further back. You called them, the dog chose to take an option B on the recall. "I don't feel like coming to you right now." What the dog's really saying is, "That recall cue isn't really as well trained as you think it is."



What Was That Cookie For?! When Positive Reinforcement In Dog Training Goes Wrong

00:11:57

Your instructing didn't land the way you were hoping it to, so why don't you review the teaching that you've done? Instead, you've reinforced the dog for not coming by, "Hey, you love squeakies. I'm going to squeak this squeaky." And then the dog comes, but you actually are rewarding the dog for not coming. 'If you stay away and you ignore me, I'll get something better, something you love more.'

How does that reinforce you? If you're late for work, you get the dog inside. So "Yeah, that's a win, Susan. It's a win." But what you're really saying is "Anytime it's raining or cold or I'm in a hurry or you're just disinterested. Then you go off and do your own thing and I'll just keep raising the stakes, bringing out better reinforcement to get you to do what I want."

00:12:40

And our final scenario, the dog pulls on leash because they want to go to the pond, and you reinforce the pulling on leash by running faster. How are you doing that? It's something called [negative reinforcement](#). You relieve the pressure of the leash.

And I call negative reinforcement the silent killer of dreams for a reason, because a lot of times you don't realize you are reinforcing. When you take that leash off, the relief of the confinement is reinforced by getting to the dogs playing in the fountain and joining in on that fun.

00:13:12

What was that cookie for? You might think it was to help you not have to deal with the dog pulling, but it was really you just reinforced the pulling. 'If you pull, I'll take the leash off, and you can go do what you want.' How does it help you? Well, of course it makes it easier for you to walk because you don't have a dog stretching your shoulder out.

So, what was that cookie for is a magic question that will help you to recognize maybe my reinforcement-based dog training isn't working because of my application of it. And do I really want my dog to think 'I really love when you're doing this, and I'd like you to do more of it.'?

00:13:49

I want you to realize we are all on a journey of dog training and we are all learning. I myself back in the 90s with one of my obedience dogs, every time I would be heeling with her, and she would get a little bit poopy and not really want to play anymore, I would go, "Oh, I must've heeled too long." I'd break it off and I'd play tug with her.

And then instead of her heeling for say, I don't know, 10 minutes. She started heeling for 8 minutes, and then 6, and then 5, and then 4, and then suddenly I couldn't even get a minute of animated heeling out of her before she'd get poopy.

00:14:22

Because 'What was that cookie for, Susan?' I was reinforcing her disengaging, but in my mind, I thought I was making her happy. What was that cookie for and how could you change that? So, number one, you need to be aware of what are those reinforcers. The five categories that I mentioned.

Number two, you've got to realize how did it reinforce you? Because the dog training that reinforces you is a dog training that will get repeated. So, is it healthy, intentional dog training? Or is it confusing dog training that you're reinforcing? You know, if you think of all reinforcement isn't equal, some of it is creating clarity and growing behaviors and relationships for the dog.



What Was That Cookie For?! When Positive Reinforcement In Dog Training Goes Wrong

00:15:05

And some of it is creating confusion or it's just vague and undirected reinforcement. We don't want vague, undirected reinforcement. We want clear, purposeful reinforcement. So, I want you to know your dog, know how you are getting reinforced.

And I want to remind you that when you're giving that reinforcement, I want you to be able to say, "I really love when you're doing that, and I hope you do more of it."

00:15:28

That goes for those of you in agility, your dog releases themselves [off the start line](#) and you just run. I want your friends in the back to yell out, "Hey, your dog has a message for you. He's glad that you really love when he breaks a start line because he's happy to do more of that in the future."

So even I was inadvertently reinforcing my dog when I didn't realize it. So, I want you to give yourself grace. If you're at a place where you go, "Oh my gosh, Susan, I've really screwed up my dog here. I see why my reinforcement-based dog training hasn't been working the way I wanted it to."

00:15:57

So, once you've taken inventory of what you've got and why you've got, if you still have some questions about what you can do next with this information, jump over to YouTube, leave me a question. Tell me what do you believe you've been telling your dog, "I really love that and I hope I get more of it." but you didn't really want your dog to get that message.

In my next episode, I'll share with you how we can all go about fixing it. I'll see you next time right here on Shaped by Dog.





Episode: #256

What Was That Cookie For?! When Positive Reinforcement In Dog Training Goes Wrong

Learn How To Play ItsYerChoice:

[ItsYerChoice Summit](#)

Resources:

[Podcast Episode 205: The Hidden World Of Reinforcement For Dogs And Why You Need To Know](#)

[Podcast Episode 231: The Next Generation Of Dog Lovers: Finya's School Assignment](#)

[Podcast Episode 42: Behavior Chains: Are You Teaching Your Dog to be Bad to Be Good?](#)

[Podcast Episode 139: Remove Confusion And Build Your Dog's Confidence With One Simple Dog Training Habit](#)

[Podcast Episode 141: Average Or Better Dog Training Question: What Did You Just Reward?](#)

[Podcast Episode 142: Giving And Receiving Constructive Feedback About Your Dog Training](#)

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

[Podcast Episode 253: 7 Ways To Instantly Make Your Dog's Life Better](#)

[YouTube Video: How To Get Your Dog To Listen Outside Off Leash \(Step By Step Guide\)](#)

[YouTube Playlist: Loose Leash Walking with Susan Garrett](#)

[Podcast Episode 59: Why Your Treats Aren't Working for Your Dog](#)

[Podcast Episode 226: Safe Toys For Dogs And Why To Avoid Tennis Balls And Sticks](#)

[Podcast Episode 198: What Does "Positive Is Not Permissive" Really Mean In Dog Training](#)

[Podcast Episode 177: Dog Training Outside The Box: Transfer Of Value Case Study](#)

[YouTube Playlist: Dog Agility Training and Dog Sports Tips with Susan Garrett](#)

[YouTube Playlist: Fearful Dogs Help with Susan Garrett](#)

[Podcast Episode 146: Balanced Dog Training: Does It Really Exist?](#)

[YouTube Live: Grow & Improve Your Dog's Agility Skills: Seesaws, Start Lines, Weave Poles, Contacts and More!](#)



What Was That Cookie For?! When Positive Reinforcement In Dog Training Goes Wrong

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.



Meet Us Online

- Website <https://dogsthat.com>
- Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/SusanGarrettDogAgility/>
- Instagram <https://www.instagram.com/SusanGarrettDogsThat/>
- TikTok <https://www.tiktok.com/@dogsthat>
- LinkedIn <https://www.linkedin.com/company/dogsthat>
- Pinterest <https://pinterest.ca/dogsthatcom/>
- Twitter <https://twitter.com/susangarrett>
- YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/c/DogsThat>
- YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/user/ClickerDogs>

