

Dog Training Community And Controversy: Can We Draw From Our Positive Reinforcement Values?

Speaker Key

SG Susan Garrett

Transcript

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In today's Shaped by Dog episode, I'm going to tackle a difficult conversation. And I want to convey the compassion and empathy I have for everybody when I'm sharing my experiences and my observations. I know that I can't help but offend somebody.

And if that is you, I am truly sorry, but I hope you listen with an open mind because this isn't me teaching. This is me questioning. This is me opening a dialogue, looking for feedback.

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Hi, I'm Susan Garrett. Welcome to Shaped by Dog. Now, if you are on social media and in the dog training world, you would have become aware of an incident that happened over the weekend at one of the world's most prestigious dog events.

And that is [Crufts held in the UK](#). Now, Crufts is massive. I don't know if it's bigger than [Westminster](#), but they both are two pretty big dog shows. And there's lots of booths, places where you can go shopping.

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There was a vendor by the name of [LickiMat](#). Now LickiMat, I've used their products myself. They are a great product for [enrichment](#). And it's something that I've talked about a lot on this podcast. Now, LickiMat offered their booth to a dog trainer who had written a book and wanted to do a book signing. He needed two hours of booth space.

Now, unbeknownst, or maybe not totally aware of the press that this dog trainer brought along with him, it became a big drama on social media. The dog trainer is a known trainer of aversives, that he uses tools that many of us or probably all of us in the reinforcement-based dog training world would never dream of using on a dog.

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And so, that caused a huge blow up on social media. And there were a lot of reinforcement-based dog trainers that were calling for a boycott of the LickiMat products. And a lot of thoughts came flooding through my brain. My first thought was, is bullying prevalent in even the reinforcement-based dog training community?

And if the answer is yes, is that congruent with the kind of trainer we want to be for our dogs? And if the answer is no, then does this make it easier or more difficult for us to be the best for our dogs? That's a question that I'm asking. I'm going to talk separately about the experiences of the LickiMat, whether they were completely ignorant of the situation, or not.

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I don't see that it matters because should we make a stand that only dogs owned by reinforcement-based trainers should be allowed to use products that are made for enrichment? And I hope that you would all be shaking your head. Well, no, I don't agree with the way they train, but I don't want their dogs to suffer because I've shut down a company because I didn't approve of the way they ran their business.



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It reminds me of several years ago, I went into business with two friends of mine, Dr. Karen Becker and Rodney Habib, authors of the New York Times bestselling book, [The Forever Dog](#). Now, we had a small business where we had a membership together.

And after about a year, I came to them and I said, "Look, you guys, are on an amazing mission. Your mission is to have every single dog in the world be fed a fresh, balanced, whole diet that will help lead to the longest longevity ever known to dogdom. I don't believe your association with me is going to help that cause."

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And why would you? Because yeah, they love dogs. They love thinking of training dogs with kindness. Neither Rodney nor Karen are quote unquote dog trainers, but they certainly would love to see dogs train with kindness.

But I said, probably the majority of people training dogs at this point in life, and maybe we're getting close to things changing, but maybe most of the dogs being trained are trained with some form of punishment.

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That even if they're [using lures](#), that when they make a poor choice, there will be a consequence that will involve punishment for that poor choice. The majority of the world. Now, if that's the case, and your business is aligned with a person who doesn't believe in that, then you might be shutting off the opportunity to reach all these people.

Do I believe it's right that just because you choose to [train differently than me](#), that you shouldn't have access to two of the greatest minds of feeding dogs? So, for the people like LickiMat or other dog businesses, I personally think it's probably smarter for them not to align with anyone. Yes, they can have their personal feelings, but maybe they shouldn't be bringing in any dog trainers.

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Now, I could be a hundred percent wrong on that. I would love to think that aligning with reinforcement-based dog trainers is not going to hurt anybody's business, but I think we should all be open to the fact that it might. And in this instance, aligning themselves with a punishment-based trainer definitely had some fallout.

And that's where I went to the behavior as a community. If we think about like, what are the things that make great [reinforcement-based dog trainers?](#) Like we could say, what are the things that make great dog trainers? There's like timing and mechanics and observation and data collection. I believe those things make a great dog trainer, no matter how you choose to train a dog.

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I think if you're training with reinforcement, then you need to have an incredible amount of curiosity for [what is reinforcing](#). I don't think you need that degree of curiosity if you have punishment in your back pocket, because you can always go back to the do it, damn it.

I believe that reinforcement-based dog trainers need to have a ton of compassion for dogs and also always have this drive for connection. So, [curiosity, compassion, and connection](#) for me are three things that really will allow you to be an amazing reinforcement-based dog trainer.



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And if you want to be a person who shows up in the biggest way for your dogs that is amazing at the use of reinforcement, do you think your journey will have you get there faster if you're practicing more often. Well, the answer is obviously yes.

So, if you could train your dog once a day, every day, you would be better than somebody who can only train their dog with the use of reinforcement once a week, correct?

But what if you could rehearse the use, the manipulation of reinforcement 15 times a day? Would that not make you better? Would that not change the way your brain thinks? Absolutely.

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And for me personally, I'm always seeking alignment and a congruency between who I am as a human being and how I train my dog.

If there is somebody in my life that I don't like the way they go about things, what is the curiosity, the compassion and the connection that can help me see them in a different light.

Now, through this quest of alignment and congruency, it's changed me. I am not the same person, I'm not the same dog trainer I was 30 years ago.

And I keep evolving and changing practically daily. And so, I think to be brilliant for our dogs, it's important that we practice with all the people in our lives.

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So, what happens when we are triggered? And honestly, I get triggered. I can't watch the videos of some of the more extreme dog trainers. I can't even watch the critiques that some reinforcement-based dog trainers do of those extreme aversive trainers because it just hurts my heart. I can't watch a dog be put in that position.

And so, would I wish that everybody in the world stopped training that way?

A hundred percent yes, I do wish that that would happen. But when I feel triggered, I know that's my body sending me a message. And my question, you know, this is a lot of rambling. You know, Maya Angelou said, 'When we know better, we do better.'

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How do we get to know better? There was a great [podcast that Brené Brown](#) had recently, and it was all about compassion.

And she had this three-by-three chart, which was fascinating, and I thought relevant to this conversation.

And on the first column, it was what fuels compassion. And it was kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness.

And the far end of this chart, she had what is the far enemy, like the complete opposite of those three fuels for compassion.

And she listed hostility, dehumanization, and reactivity. It makes sense, right?

If compassion is kindness, then the complete far end, the enemy of compassion is hostility and reactivity and dehumanization.



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But in the middle, she had what is like the near enemy of compassion. The three things that were moving away from compassion. Those three things she had listed, pity, sameness, and complacency.

Well, pity, I can see is taking us a little bit away from compassion because we're judging when we're pitying. And also, complacency is like almost being unemotional or unaffected. It is moving away from compassion. But sameness, I couldn't understand that until I listened.

And she said, "Sameness disregards and marginalizes the experiences of others." Now you may say, as one commenter said in the post I was reading, they said, "My compassion is for dogs and for people who are compassionate with their dogs. I have no compassion for people who would train their dogs that way."

And I thought that's exactly where I was when I started giving seminars, is I saw the world through the eyes of the dog I was trying to help. I had so much compassion for those dogs, so much connection for those dogs, but I [didn't have the same for the person on the other end of the leash](#).

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And so, when they did what I viewed as being unkind or unfair to their dog, I didn't hold back. I addressed them without compassion. And that's when I learned over the years, it took a long time to learn the valuable lesson that 'Susan, you're [never going to help a person who you're judging](#).' 'You're never going to help a dog who you're judging.'

And when you learn how to help those people, that's when you change as a human being. That probably took me 20 years to learn. But I know that if we really want dogs worldwide to be treated with kindness and respect and compassion that we have to find a way to not be viewed as the bullies of social media.

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That's not who we are. That's not who we want to show up as to our dogs. And in order to be consistent and have ease at showing up as that person as our dogs, it's best to rehearse it as often as we can in our everyday life. Does that make sense? Now it's hard because you can say, "I did what they did, and I moved on. I don't want that."

And so, it's difficult to see both sides of this same story.

If you are a reinforcement based or a force free trainer, whatever you want to refer to yourself as, somebody who has chosen not to use physical punishment or verbal intimidation in your dog training, then there is going to be commonalities in the way that you train with the way a balanced trainer, or an aversive trainer does train.

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The challenge is we don't get each other. And from the one hand where we're sitting, I don't want to know how the humane way to use an electric collar. I just don't. But that doesn't mean I can't learn from the timing and the mechanics and the data collection and the antecedent arrangements of that trainer.

I would love to watch those trainers if they promised me, they wouldn't be using punishment in their training. Now, my hallucination, and it could be completely off base, is that balanced trainers believe reinforcement-based dog trainers are balanced trainers who choose not to correct. And that's just not true.



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But I believe reinforcement-based dog trainers believe balanced trainers are just trainers who poorly apply their reinforcement. Therefore, they need punishment and that they use punishment 50 percent of the time. And I don't believe that's true either.

You know, last year I agreed to do a podcast with a well-known balanced trainer, and I didn't promote it on my own page because I have a lot of 'first time', 'we're new to training this way' dog trainers, and I didn't want to cloud the waters for them.

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I didn't want to take them off the path that we've got them on when they're listening to [Shaped by Dog podcast episodes](#). But it was a difficult experience for me. Because I was so far removed from the use of any force in my dog training.

There was one point in the podcast I just struggled to understand why the interviewer couldn't understand what I was presenting.

So, the scenario was I asked him, and I brought this problem specifically because I know it's a difficult problem to deal with. I said, "Do you ever have to deal with dogs who like to mouth their dumbbells or articles that they're retrieving?"

And he said, of course he did. And I knew from my history of being in the punishment world, that it was one that I never saw resolved.

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I always saw resurgence throughout the dog's life, which makes sense if the way you're approaching it is through punishment.

So, I presented a video of my then Border Collie, Buzzy, who I wrote the book [Shaping Success](#) about. Buzzy was an enthusiastic retriever and he felt the need to mouth, bite hard on every single thing you asked him to retrieve.

Any toy, anything you asked him to retrieve, he would mouth it a quadrillion times. I might be exaggerating on the way back.

And then I [showed a video of me in the same situation](#), throwing out different toys. I pulled out a dumbbell and I threw the dumbbell and Buzzy ran out, grabbed it, brought it back.

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And the game I played with Buzzy, if I reach for the dumbbell with one hand, he could go crazy and play with me. If I reach with two, he just held it still. And so, the question that the interviewer asked me over and over again, I'm sure he thought I was obtuse, but I honestly was trying to grasp why he didn't understand.

He kept saying, "What did you do when he bit the dumbbell, when he started mouthing?"

And I said, "But he didn't. That video was him as a two-year-old dog. He lived to be almost 18 and he never mouthed a dumbbell."

And he kept asking me this question.

And it wasn't until nearly the very end of our three-hour interview that I finally had some insight into why he couldn't understand what I was trying to say.



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What I was trying to say is, as a reinforcement-based dog trainer, I don't try to stop behavior. I try to replace behavior. And so, I taught that dog a separate behavior of a duration of holding something and made that into a game that he loved to play before I added it to anything that looked like a retrieve.

And so, why if you've had thousands of reinforcements for duration hold, would that suddenly turn into mouthing?

It just never did. It was specific to the things that I wanted to use in the obedience ring.

So, at the end of the video, the trainer was explaining when he's out walking and he says the word heel to his dog and he's on a flexi, his dog can stay with him just like one or two steps if he wanted.

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And then he can go off and sniff and pee on bushes and do what he wants. He's on his flexi.

And I said to him – (and this was the moment of realization for me) - I said, “But of course you wouldn't use the word heel in your world championship competitions.” And he said, “Of course I do.” And that's when I realized therein is the difference that I couldn't get across in that podcast of three hours of talking.

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And it was, if you want to train without the use of punishment, you have to be brilliant, [masterful at understanding how to use and what reinforces your dog](#). So, the fact that his dog was allowed to have different meanings for the same cue meant he was going to have to use corrections when the dog was trying to execute one cue in the midst of what he was expecting another one.

The differences between us are so great that I've been asked back on that podcast many, many times. And I said I will return but not for 10 years. And I don't think any reinforcement-based dog trainer should return until there is a genuine curiosity for how to get that level of understanding of reinforcement.

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And I'm not pompous enough to believe they need me to get that. They just need curiosity, compassion, and the drive for connection. You know after I was on that podcast, I heard a buzz that several people didn't believe that I should have been on that podcast, that I shouldn't have spent any time associating with that camp.

And so, I called up [Jean Donaldson](#) because that's a name that I heard that some of these comments were coming from not Jean herself, but her school. And I called her up and I said, “Hey, can we have a conversation?” We had a phenomenal conversation and she explained what I couldn't see.

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Now, I could have been triggered and angry and started writing smack on social media about how dare you tell me who to talk to and what I should do. But instead, I said, “Hey, I'm curious about the frame of reference.”

And it was super enlightening to me. And so, I don't know what the answer is for us to do better. We need to know better. How do we get to know better? If we know what this camp is doing, they could benefit from learning what we're doing. And to me, it's ridiculous to think we couldn't learn by what they're doing.



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The asterisk to that is I don't want to see dogs be corrected physically or verbally. So, I would love to have insights into their strategies of planning, and I love dog training, I love animal training.

But that brings me back to what happened over the weekend and what continues to happen.

I think personally, it discounts the humanity we try to bring to dog training to take to social media with such vitriol.

But even that sounds like a judgment from me, which is why when my team came to me and said, "Should we have a statement about what's going on in Crufts?" My answer was, "What do we do when we want to change the unwanted behavior of one of our dogs?"

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We can't reinforce it, number one. We can ignore it provided it's not a self-reinforcing behavior. But what we have to do is create some sort of connection and arrange antecedents that we can create a behavior to replace that unwanted behavior with.

And that's where reaching out to Jean came in for me. What could we have done differently as a community when we are triggered with outrage?

But I know there's more we can do. And so, that's the dialogue that I have for today.

Do you believe reinforcement-based dog training should be infiltrating the rest of your life?

Do you believe who you want to be as a trainer, who you want to show up for your dog, has any impact at all on how you approach conversations or challenges as a parent or a coworker, or a boss, or a sibling, or a friend, or a neighbor, or a customer in a restaurant even.

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Does it affect who you are? I know it does for me. And my hope is that it is for all of us, not just those who train with the sameness, those who are like us to observe our compassion. Those who have differences to us do not, because those who have differences to us have dogs who need compassion.

And I don't know how we reach the world, but I know that as each year moves on, I believe how we train is getting to be more and more similar.

And that's the beauty of social media. There's a downside, but there definitely is an upside as well. So, if my wish is for the growth and ascension of humanity of dog trainers worldwide, how do we get there?

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I think we get there by leaving who we were. As I mentioned, the person I was when I started teaching seminars back in the mid-nineties is not even close to the person I am today. The dog trainer I was not even close to the dog trainer I am today.

And while I was preparing for this podcast, a friend of mine sent me a text with this poem I want to share with you.

It's from creative writer Emily Hall. "Make peace with all the women you once were." And if you're a man listening to this. "Lay flowers at their feet, offer them incense and honey and forgiveness. Honor them and give them your silence. Listen. Bless them and let them be, for they are the bones of the temple you sit in now. For they are the rivers of wisdom leading you towards the sea. I have been a thousand different women."



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I want you to [give yourself grace and give yourself the compassion](#) that I know we all want for dogs. The person that you were yesterday, with every lesson, with every opportunity to grow is a new person today.

So, I open this dialogue for everybody. How can we, as a community of dog loving reinforcement-based trainers show up as our best self when we get triggered by things out of our control? What is the methodology fueled by compassion that we can apply to get the change we would love to see but that we have no right to demand.

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I'd love to get your feedback. I'd love to read your comments. And I hope I haven't offended anybody by what I'm sharing. I hope it just gives you pause for more curiosity in your life. I'll see you next time right here on Shaped by Dog.

Resources:

[Crufts International Dog Show](#)

[Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show](#)

[LickiMat Website](#)

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

[Book: The Forever Dog by Dr. Karen Becker and Rodney Habib](#)

[Podcast Episode 175: Food Luring VS Shaping In Dog Training: How Science Changed How I Teach Dogs](#)

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

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

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

[YouTube Playlist: The Heart / Mind Connection Side of Dog Training with Susan Garrett](#)

[Podcast: Unlocking Us with Brené Brown](#)

[Podcast Episode 7: You, Your Dog, Maslow and Lizard Brain](#)

[Podcast Episode 91: Why Judgement Does Not Help People Or Dogs: ItsYerChoice LWT](#)

[Shaped by Dog Podcast Episodes Site Index](#)

[Book: Shaping Success by Susan Garrett](#)

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

[Jean Donaldson Academy for Dog Trainers](#)

[Podcast Episode 208: Brilliance, Resilience And Gratitude: Inspiration And Motivation With Elliott Connie](#)



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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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