

Do Dogs Really Test Us? Fluctuations In Dog Behavior, What It Means And what To Do

Speaker Key

SG Susan Garrett

Transcript

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Do our dogs test us? That was a question I asked on social media based on my [last podcast episode](#) where I was talking about [dominance theory](#). I got a lot of different answers and different opinions. And today, I'd like to talk more about the subject of 'Do our dogs test us and when?' Because I may have changed my stance on this.

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Hi, I'm Susan Garrett. Welcome to Shaped by Dog. And since publishing our last podcast episode, we have had a lot of different viewers and listeners that have come to our YouTube page and to this podcast.

People who maybe, somebody had shared the last episode and potentially it irked them. It got them to a place where they felt the need to jump over to [my YouTube channel](#) and leave some comments. I think it's resulted in some decent dialogue.

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And what I have to say today is really about my journey in dog training and the view I have on dog training. For many of you, it's going to be something that would be of interest, and I'm hoping will be somewhat enlightening.

To those of you who are happening by this page because of the recent controversy, I really, really hope you stick with this because I believe as dog trainers, [we should be driven for growth](#). I started my journey in the world of dogs when I was a teenager, and it was in the seventies, and I was christened into the world of conformation.

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I worked for professional handlers and that's where I saw the sport of dog obedience, which I was just in awe of. It blew my mind that people could get dogs to do these things. Now, back in the seventies, there was very little use of positive reinforcement, but the dogs being brilliant dogs, they did what they were meant to do.

It was impressive to me. I then jumped in. I got a university degree in animal science where I was introduced to the world of behavior. And when I graduated from university, that's when I really got interested in training animals. And within 10 years of graduating, I was teaching dog training professionally at a school.

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Competition obedience and flyball were the two sports I was obsessed with. I had Jack Russell Terriers and Border Collies. At one point, I owned three intact Jack Russell Terriers. I did, hunting with them, go to ground, and dog agility, competition obedience, and flyball.

Now that's a little backstory. Now I'm going to do a little bit of bragging. Just so you know that even though I've been training dogs for a lot of years, I haven't been training dogs the same way for a lot of years. I started in what I would call balanced training where I use food as a lure to prompt behaviors, but when I felt the dog knew it, they got a collar correction.



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I trained on a chain collar, I trained on a flat collar, and I trained on a prong collar. My dogs were very, very good at sports. In the world of competition obedience, I often got scores at 199 or even 199 and a half. Never got the elusive 200 score. And in the world of dog agility, I have been a world champion many, many times over.

[My book that I wrote in 2005](#) was named "Dog Training Book of the Year" by the Dog Writers Association of America. So, I'm saying all of this to establish that I have credibility in the world of dog sports. I've trained many different breeds my own. I've had Bully breeds, I've had Terriers, and my current love are Border Collies.

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Now, if we go to my students' dogs, you name a breed and we've trained one of those dogs, I'm sure. And beyond dogs, I've also trained horses, and I've had the opportunity to spend a week training dolphins and manatees and sea lions. But my experience doesn't end there because I've also trained chickens with my mentors, Bob and Marian Bailey.

So, my journey into dog training and behavior started off with 'follow a cookie and get a pop.' But by the early nineties, I had turned over to a more science approach where I was using reinforcement to train dogs. And I was moving away from any kind of physical corrections or verbal intimidation to get a dog to do what I want.

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And so, since the mid-nineties, now for the past 30 years, my focus has been on reinforcement based and game-based dog training. And one of the most important things that I've learned as a dog trainer, and anybody who's a professional dog trainer, please listen to this closely.

You never want to be the smartest person in the room or the smartest person in the conversation. If you are the smartest person in the room in the conversation on an ongoing basis, you are feeding your ego. The opportunity for you to grow has been stifled.

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There's a great quote from Benjamin Franklin that goes something like this, 'Without continual growth and progress, words such as improvement, achievement, and success are meaningless.' So, I believe you should seek to be in rooms with people who either are achieving things differently in a way that aligns with your core values, or they're doing things differently.

So, I love listening to people geek out on their form of dog training. Yes, protection work. I love listening to people working in protection work, or search and rescue, or even a different species. I love listening to experts. I love being in conversations with experts because I consider myself a lifelong learner.

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And therefore, I learn not just from other experts, but I learn in particular from dogs. Yes, my own dogs, but my students' dogs. So, I challenge you all, no matter where you are in your dog training journey, trust me, I've likely been there. And what's brought me to the place where I'm at today is curiosity.

To be in a room where you can express your curiosity, to be in a conversation where you can express your curiosity. Just this afternoon, I was in a great conversation with my mentor, Bob Bailey. We were just sitting on Zoom, and I would just throw out topics and we would start riffing on these topics. I love being in those conversations.



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And I hope no matter what level of success you've had as a dog trainer, you keep pushing for new rooms and new opportunities to have these conversations. So, back to our topic. When I said I may have changed my thought on 'do dogs challenge us?', because initially let me share with you what I said in a [YouTube short](#).

I said, I don't believe dogs are trying to test us intentionally. I believe that we could be challenged by the behaviors our dogs are exhibiting because we don't have the experience or the education to deal with what the dog is showing us. And I still believe that in a lot of cases, that's the truth.

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But why do I want to backtrack a little bit on 'do dogs test?' Because I sat and thought about this a lot more. And when we train dogs, we follow the ABCs. No matter if you recognize the ABCs or not, we are all following them. [The ABCs of dog training](#) or of animal training are [the antecedents, the behavior, the consequence](#).

The antecedents are the environment. Things like what's reinforcing? What do we have that's reinforcing? How are we handling that reinforcement? What's in the environment that's reinforcing? What opportunities in the environment are reinforcing? The antecedents are all the things that act on the dog to create a behavior.

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You're cueing the dog would be an antecedent. And the B is the dog's behavior, and the C is the consequence. Now, when I'm training a dog, I'm always evaluating what the dog knows. Early on in the process, if the antecedents are arranged properly, the dog is going to be successful every single time.

That may appear like the dog knows something, but the moment we change those antecedents, put the dog in a different environment, they will appear to be making wrong choices all the time. And so, early in the process, when we're first introducing the idea of what we want, when we've arranged the antecedents for the dog to do what we want, that behavior is in flux.

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If the dog responds more to the environment than to us, they're going to make a mistake. That's not testing, right? That's a dog with an incomplete education. And so, what we do is we see the dog making a choice we don't want to, and we respond.

How do we respond? By manipulating the antecedents. So, when you see a dog with a behavior that's in flux, you're always changing the antecedents. If you do that often enough, you create enough [pictures for the dog](#) to do the behavior you are trying to teach.

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And the dog learns, 'I can do it in this scenario, this picture means the same thing, this picture means the same thing, and this picture means the same thing.' Then a behavior can go from being in flux to being fluent. Just like a language, the dog can speak it immediately. You give them a cue they can respond by giving you the behavior.

The A, the B, the C. Now what could be happening if you believe your dog is testing, you prompt the dog with a cue. The antecedent arrangements is such that the dog doesn't give you what you want. And rather than responding by examining the antecedents, you react by looking at the behavior and giving a consequence.



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Now, in my world, the consequence is reinforcement for the dog doing it correctly. But if you believe a dog is testing, that consequence could be a collar correction or worse. So, when I say I believe dogs test, I believe dogs test when behaviors are in flux. Meaning they try, "Is it this?" In hopes that they're correct.

And when they are correct, hooray! We see the behavior we reward with a consequence of reinforcement. As long as a behavior is in flux, the potential for it to be altered based on the antecedents are high. So, you can't go from 'you can sit in the kitchen' to 'why aren't you sitting at the bunny farm?' I think that's an example that everybody can agree on.

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"Oh, you've just jumped too many steps. That's just not right." The behavior is in flux. I believe that the only time a dog tests us is when a behavior is in flux. When that behavior truly goes to being fluent, you're not going to get tests. I've been thinking about this a lot. Can I name a time where I believe my dogs test me? Not with a known behavior.

And if they have, then what has changed? [Maybe it's your spouse](#). You like your dog to sit at the door, but your partner will say, "I'm in a hurry. So, just go." Or your partner says, "Oh, there's a bunny out there. Go get the bunny." And the dog sometimes doesn't have to do that. You then take a behavior that was fluent, you put it back in flux.

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So, it may look like to you that the dog is testing, but what actually has happened is the antecedent arrangements got changed. The consequences of the behavior got more variables and now that behavior pops back in flux. It's not the dog testing, it's the criteria for reinforcement has been altered.

I have printed on my coffee mug that I drink out of every morning this line, 'The more I learn, the smarter my dog appears.' I want that line in front of me always, because I always want to look at dog behavior with curiosity. I never want to believe I know it all. I never want to think the dog is testing me.

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Because when you are reacting, often you're driven by ego. If you believe your dog is testing, there's a high probability that your hands are going to be on your hips, that things are going to come out of your mouth like, "What are you doing?" "How dare you?" And you're going to react with a consequence that's unpleasant.

What do I do if my dog surprises me in a behavior I thought was fluent suddenly is put in flux? Honestly, generally, I laugh. Now, the first thing I do is make sure my dog's safe. So, if I'm [letting my dog out of the car](#), I open the door, I open their crate and they just fly out, then I need my dog to be safe.

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So, I'm going to do whatever I can to stop behavior. So, I'm going to grab my dog. I'm going to put them back in the crate. I'm going to go, "Whew! That was a close one." Nine times out of 10, when my dog surprises me with a behavior I thought was fluent, showing me that it really is flux, I laugh.

I go, "Okay, um, this is a new one." Because obviously I want my dog's behaviors to be fluent, but I don't ever want them to be afraid to show me what I've taught them.



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Because if what I've taught them isn't what they learned, I need to know that so that I can go back, look at the antecedent arrangements, manipulate them in a different way and create a new picture, a new view for my dog of what this cue means in this environment. I like to think of it like that Dr. Seuss book. Can you do it in a house? Can you do it with a mouse? Can you do it here or there? Can you do it anywhere?

When our dogs can do it anywhere, we have a behavior that is fluent. If you are still getting moments of testing, your behavior is flux. And if you believe like I do, that dogs are always doing the best they can with the information that we've given them in the environment that we put them in, we're going to do something about the things we can rather than reacting as if the dog has done something they know they shouldn't.

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It's not about what they've done before in different environments. Even if it's in the same environment, it could be that you are different. There is something that has triggered them to give you a different response. And it's not up to us to say 'how dare them.'

It's up to us to observe and respond. Now, I've heard a lot of the conversations about, 'Well, if we react and correct, we get things fixed faster.' But I question, is it really faster if you consistently have to follow up behavior with consequence? And is that the kind of relationship you want with your dog?

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And is that the kind of person you want to be? Somebody who's looking out for how somebody's wronged you, how your dog is trying to pull one over on you. You know, every morning I like to meditate. And when I come out of that meditate, I rehearse a little prayer that ends with me saying, 'fuel my day with compassion for others and let me live in curiosity.'

And that is how I want to look at everything my dogs do, everything the people in my life do. It's who I strive to be. Somebody who looks at life through the lens of kindness, through compassion, and through love. And if that's the kind of lens you want to look through, it can be an intentional change.

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It's not going to happen overnight. You've got to [give yourself grace](#) and know this journey for me started when I was a teenager. I am 63 years old and I'm still a lifelong learner. Things are continuing to evolve, and I hope if you love dogs as much as I do, that you never allow yourself to stay stuck in a place when there's so much more opportunity ahead. I'll see you next time right here on Shaped by Dog.





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Resources:

[Podcast Episode 290: The Red Flag Of Dominance Based Training: Why It's Hurting Your Dog And What To Do Instead](#)

[Podcast Episode 46: Is Your Dog Trying to Dominate You and What You Can Do About It](#)
[DogsThat YouTube Channel](#)

[Podcast Episode 247: Redefining Expertise In Dog Training And What Counts More Than Years Of Experience](#)

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

[YouTube Short: Do Dogs Test Owners Or Are Owners Tested By Their Lack Of Understanding Of The Science Of Learning?](#)

[Podcast Episode 202: Getting A Happy Well Behaved Dog With The ABCs Of Training](#)

[Podcast Episode 245: Make Dog Training Easy! Quick Guide To Antecedent Arrangements](#)

[YouTube Video: Dogs See In Pictures: Understanding Their View For Training Success](#)

[Podcast Episode 118: Same Home Different Rules: Will Reinforcement Based Dog Training Work?](#)

[Podcast Episode 164: The Danger Of Car Travel For Dogs: Evaluating Your Risk](#)

[Podcast Episode 150: Adding Mindset To Your Dog Training Tools: Who Do You Become?](#)



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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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