

Episode: #297

Why In 2025 We Still Have Dog Trainers Who Believe “Reinforcement Dog Training Doesn’t Work”

Speaker Key

SG Susan Garrett

Transcript

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Have you heard the news? Apparently, reinforcement-based dog training doesn't work. Well, that's according to a lot of dog trainers with huge social media following. And it comes as a surprise to not only me, but many of my peers. I myself have been doing nothing but reinforcement-based dog training since the early to mid-nineties.

To find out it doesn't work is a surprise. Like a great surprise to me. But then I've also heard people kind of, you know, come back on that a little bit and say, “Well, it might work for some people.” Oh, I'm one of the lucky ones, but I've got a lot of students, probably over a hundred thousand, over the last 30 years that it's worked really well for them too.

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And so, the comeback then is “There are sometimes it just is never going to work.” And when the desire of the dog, like reacting out of another dog is greater than the desire for the cookie, it's just not going to work. And to quote my mentor, Bob Bailey “Don't blame the methodology for one person's application of it.” or for many people's application of it.

Reinforcement based dog training is in its infancy, but there is so many ways I can help you in this one episode to get so much better than you currently are. So, if you are one of those people who find there are times when the reinforcement-based dog training isn't working for you, then this episode is for you, my friend.

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Hi, I'm Susan Garrett. Welcome to Shaped by Dog. And I've just heard this statement so many times recently and I thought I've got to do a podcast about what I've observed most recently where it appears that the reinforcement-based dog training is not working. And it reminds me of a quote, I don't know who said this one.

It was, “Those of you who keep saying this thing can't be done, need to stop interrupting those of us who are successfully doing it.” Reinforcement-based dog training is really in its infancy. I mean, it's been around since the dawning of time. I mean, that's how animals have avoided being killed. That's how they've gotten what they want.

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Just look at a crow and you can see reinforcement animal training really does work. So, there's no debating that reinforcement training works. The question is, does reinforcement-based dog training with the absence of verbal intimidation of the threats or physical corrections on a pinch collar, on a choke chain, on an electric collar, like are all of those things necessary for dogs to be well trained?

Obviously, no. And I mean, I've trained myself many different breeds of dogs and as have my students. But yet, I will agree, I have seen times, as recently as today, where it appears that the reinforcement-based dog training isn't working. And so, I want to talk about just a few of those incidences and give you some key insights into why it could be happening and what you could be doing differently to get a better outcome.



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Like be one of those of us who are saying, “Heck yeah, reinforcement dog training certainly does work.” So, I’ll give you a few examples. One personal story of mine back in 2004, I got a red Border Collie puppy named Encore.

She was amazing. Yes, she was trained in our game-based, reinforcement-based dog training programs.

Yet at six months old, she still was very triggered by dogs running, by bicycles, basically motion action was very triggering for her. So how can we stop that with reinforcement based dog training or how has it gone wrong?

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Another example would be a dog who’s [reactive to other dogs](#). You’re walking down the street. “I’ve been giving him cookies all the time and he still reacts to these other dogs. I’m really starting to believe that this isn’t going to work.”

Third example, today, I was volunteering at a Kennel Club trial, and I saw so many different breeds of dogs. There was actually, only three Border Collies in this entire trial. There were probably a hundred or more dogs, unusual to be at an agility trial with only three Border Collies, but it was really cool.

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There was this really cool little Beagle, super cool. There was some Wirehaired Vizslas. I’ve never seen them before. There was Red and White Irish Setter. They’re like some really unusual breeds.

But I saw a lot of people that when they took off the leash, the dogs left the ring, or they sniffed. They just didn’t want to do the agility.

So, all of those three seem like really dramatically different examples, but I think there’s a common theme amongst them. So, let’s talk about how reinforcement-based dog training really works and why it might not be working for some people.

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Now I’m going to get a little bit geeky here but stick with me. I’ve got some simple solutions that everybody’s going to understand. But of course, I’m a scientist at heart, so I have to bring the science into what I’m going to talk about.

When we are dealing with a trigger that we want to overcome, a scenario with our dogs, there’s a number of things that we can do. Let’s say, for example, my dog is very triggered by bunnies. I have to eventually be able to walk my dog through the middle of a bunny farm. You know, this is a fictitious place, right?

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I mean, imagine somewhere in this world, there might be free roaming bunnies in multiple numbers, but I use it as a great fictitious example because anybody, and I know not all countries in the world have bunnies everywhere, but you probably have your own little critters roaming around that you can make them into a farm.

So, most people understand that a bouncing bunny is something that will trigger [a dog’s prey instinct](#). Really, almost no matter what breed of dog that it is. And so, there are several ways to get the dog through the bunny farm without using physical corrections or verbal intimidation.



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So, the first thing you could do is if you had a really, really high, high value reward, like say a tennis ball or a great big meatball and the bunny farm wasn't that big, you might be able to put the tennis ball or the meatball on your dog's nose and make your way through the bunny farm.

Is that an example of reinforcement-based dog training working? No, not at all. That's an example of you masking [your dog's emotional state](#) by the presence of something that they really, really like. And it's not going to work for all dogs. If dogs have had success, a history of success chasing and capturing bunnies, that probably isn't going to work for those dogs.

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If the bunny farm is really big, eventually it may not work for all dogs. But people think it's an example of reinforcement-based dog training when really it isn't. It isn't. It's a way to get you out of a situation to keep your dog's emotions under threshold until you can get them out of that situation.

So, if you've seen it happening a lot and people think they're training their dog, you might want to direct them to this episode because really, you're not training. You are subduing emotions by presenting an overpoweringly reinforcing stimulus to your dog. Alright, it's done, but it's not training.

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It's not even pattern training because you really don't allow the dog to experience the emotions of seeing these bunnies going because you are, you know, got them captivated by whatever it is that reinforcement is in front of their face.

So, masking is something that, “Hey, we may need to do.” But really the approach that reinforcement-based dog training is going to work in all of those situations is going to be a three-step process. The number one thing you're going to do is you're going to desensitize the dog. So, I mentioned that my Border Collie Encore was very triggered by motion.

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And so, what I would do with her, I actually took her to an agility trial that had a hill. I sat up on the hill far enough away that she could see the dogs, but she wasn't like, her toenails didn't come out and she didn't start vocalizing. And she was like, ‘they're there, but they were a long, long distance away.’ Maybe a football field away.

So, she watched them, but then she was happy to just chill with me. I would give her cookies every now and again. I would break it off and play a game of tug every now and again. But what I was working on is what is the distance away that I have a dog in an emotional state that she can be engaged in a way that allows her to think.

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So, what is that distance for your dog? My dog Buzz, he was the biggest challenge and probably because I knew the least. With him, it was like two football fields away, but I think I'd skipped so many steps at the beginning. I just made it too difficult.

So, if agility was too hard for Encore, I would probably just go to a park in town that I often take my puppies to that would have like rollerbladers or the odd dog with a jogger. So, it would just be random motion. It would be motion with kids, motion with bicycles, motion with you know, electric scooters, wheelchairs, like all sorts of things. And that would be the first step in the desensitization. Now, what if you skip desensitization and you went right on to step two, which is counterconditioning.



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Counterconditioning would be my dog sees the motion and I give them something that they want. Here's how reinforcement-based dog training fails when we're counterconditioning. Number one, people like might say, “Oh, my dog likes liver.” And you might go, “Oh, I see there's a dog. I think there's a dog coming. I'm going to— I hear the jingling. I'm going to start giving my dog the liver.”

But your dog doesn't see the other dog. And when they do, they might grab the liver, but in a more aroused state, you can feel their teeth on your hands and you're masking their true emotions. You're not really counterconditioning.

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And if you keep up with this, the presence of that high value food, the liver, you might get a reverse conditioning in that if the presence of the dog was something that they feared rather than reactive in a forward way, then that presence of the liver might trigger the dog to then want to get out of there.

You've taken something that was super high reinforcing, you've reversed it to turn into something that, ‘I don't want to deal with this. I want to get out of here. I don't want your cookie.’ And so, you'll get high value cookies, and you turn them into cookies that you can't use.

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So, counterconditioning in the midst of a big fear, which is what I try to tell my balanced training friends when they say, “How are you going to deal with this dog that they've got strung up because it's aggressing towards another dog?” And my answer is, “I would never try to deal with it in that emotional state.” Because it's unfair to the dog. They aren't in a thoughtful brain. That's not the step that I would begin with.

I would begin with the desensitization at a very, very safe distance. And the [counterconditioning](#) could then happen at the distance my dog has told me time and time again, “I'm comfortable here.” And then you can be very cognizant of your timing that the dog sees the dog, you start feeding.

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So, the sight of the dog predicts high value reinforcement is going to come. With me, I like to use tug because it's so simple and easy to get my dog in a higher aroused state and I can get them to tug, and I can tug them even away or tug them to a distance further away and then let them look at the dog again and see, are they emotionally calm?

Because they know they're at a safe distance. So, food, I obviously, I absolutely use food, but I will also use tug from a safe distance. I'm not going to use tug up close because that might get the other dog aroused and we don't want that. So, once I've worked on counterconditioning, remember counterconditioning is not dog training.

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It's building a relationship between a stimulus that your dog is either, worried, stressed, triggered by, with a stimulus that you know is very reinforcing for the dog. Alright so, you might have your car nearby. The dog sees another dog, they get to get in the car.

So, the presence of that other dog means a car ride if that's what they love. So, it can be any number of things. Obviously, food is used the most because we can get many reinforcements in during the presence of that dog.



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There's a lot of things you need to know about counterconditioning because there's something called “overshadowing.” And I'm not going to get into that right now, but that's a simplistic look. And that is of counterconditioning, but it happens after desensitization.

Now, once Encore has been desensitized and I've worked on counterconditioning, and I now have her at a place where I can use [operant conditioning](#). This is where my reinforcement-based dog training is going to work now, people. It wasn't going to work before. It wasn't.

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Because my dog's emotional state would never have allowed it to happen. And so now, operant conditioning, the A, the B, the C. The A —you all know this story, right? The A, the antecedent could be a cue, ‘sit.’ It could be a trigger, the sight of another dog or for Encore, dogs running and doing agility.

And then we get the B, what is the behavior you're going to choose? So, if it's lunging, then I know my counterconditioning wasn't working so that I need to go back to either desensitization or counterconditioning. My dog is not in a place where she is ready to make operant choices. The B, the behavior is the dog's choice.

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We don't force it, right? Putting the meatball on the face, masking, that's taking away the dog's choice. The ABCs, the dog has to make a choice. And we never put a dog into a position of wanting to work on ABCs unless the dog number one - feels safe, number two - feels confident. That's the two things we need before we can [start working on our ABCs](#).

So, I've got Encore in a position where she sees the dog at ringside going to do agility. And what does she do? She looks up at me and I go, yes. Give her a marker, tell her “Strike.” Well, back then I didn't use strike, I used “Get it.” And then what I would do is move away from the ring, a safer distance, and then have a little tug game and then bring her back up.

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She might watch a little bit and then she'll look back at me and I'll say, “Hey, you want to go play a game?” Boom. Back we go, ABC. Choice is involved. The C, the consequence is a fun game of tug, or I might not play tug. I might praise her for checking back in with me. Exactly what I wrote about in [‘Shaping Success.’](#) that I did with Buzzy.

Look at the thing that you're a little bothered by, check back in with me and earn high value rewards. So that is how reinforcement-based dog training works. If we have a dog who's overstimulated, we work at desensitizing them, getting their emotions into a place where they can be under threshold, where we can then counter condition, meaning create a new trigger, then we're gonna give them some choices.

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So, getting back to today, when I was at this agility trial, and here's what I would see. I would see a lot of people feeding their dog. It was like the pre run cookie-stuffing event. They were giving the dogs cookies. Probably to keep them distracted from sniffing or whatever it was.

But [what were those cookies for?](#) Were they desensitizing anything? Were they counterconditioning anything? Were they the consequence for a choice? The answer in my mind was no, because one cookie was coming so fast after the other, the dog didn't have a chance to make a choice.



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So, if you have a dog that might chase, you've got to work through those, the desensitizing, the counterconditioning, and then the ABCs. I don't think that was the case for all of these dogs. I think they were kind of giving like promissory notes, 'go in there and do the thing and you'll get more when you get out.'

But when they went in there, a lot of these dogs just disengaged and sniffed or went around the jumps or went and visited the judge. And why then is that reinforcement-based dog training not working? Because very likely the [training was lumped](#). Meaning there weren't a lot of [great games](#) that were played with a dog before they ever went in the ring.

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And before you ever, when you went to your first ever agility class, I'm hoping they taught things like Recall and Retrieve and value for [Reinforcement Zone](#) and Hand Targets. And you never got on equipment for the first month or two or three. But that's not the way most people teach dog agility.

You sign up for the class and they get you on low equipment and they put cookies. I can't tell you the number of dogs in the jumpers' class that left the ring seeking out the hidden agility contacts. They had the contacts behind some barriers, but this one dog, anytime he saw the contacts, he'd have to go and find it because probably there were cookies put at the bottom of them at some point in that dog's life.

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So, yes, we've had conditioning, but the conditioning hasn't been to that owner, that handler. So, if your reinforcement-based dog training appears to not be working, I promise you, it is not the methodology. It's the application of the reinforcement in the training.

If you can, jump over to [my YouTube channel](#), click on a playlist and deep dive into any topic from [Puppy Training](#) to Reactivity, to [Trick Training](#), to [Creating Targets](#). That's what's going to help you understand the ABCs of dog training so that you too can be somebody that says 30 years from now— "Heck 30, I've been doing reinforcement-based dog training for 30 years and it's worked amazing for me."

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I'd love to get your feedback on this. Jump over to my YouTube channel, leave me a comment. And while you're there, please subscribe to the channel. Give us a like. Because that's how you tell the fine fairies at YouTube that our content is worth sharing with other dog owners just like you. I'll see you next time right here on Shaped by Dog.





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Resources:

[YouTube Playlist: Reactive or Aggressive Dogs: Key Insights with Susan Garrett](#)

[Podcast Episode 232: Canine Predatory Motor Sequence: Understand Your Dog's Prey Drive To Enrich Your Life Together](#)

[YouTube Playlist: The Emotional State of Dogs with Susan Garrett](#)

[Podcast Episode 165: Why Do Dogs Bark In Cars And How To Stop It](#)

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

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

[Shaping Success Book by Susan Garrett](#)

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

[Blog Post: 6 Keys to Shaping Behaviour](#)

[YouTube Playlist: Dog Training Games with Susan Garrett](#)

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

[DogsThat YouTube Channel](#)

[YouTube Playlist: Puppy Essentials with Susan Garrett Dog Training](#)

[YouTube Video: 5 Tips for Dog Trick Training with Susan Garrett](#)

[YouTube Playlist: Target Training for Dogs with Susan Garrett](#)



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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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