

Are You Learning Or Looping: What To Do When Training Your Dog Stops Being Fun

Speaker Key

SG Susan Garrett

Transcript

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If you're a friend of the podcast, then I'm pretty sure you've heard me say at least one time, if not more, that dog training should be fun for the dog and fun for the human. That means it should be filled with connection, joy, and two-way communication. But I'm pretty sure every single person listening to this episode can think about a time when it wasn't all that much fun for you, and that's what today's episode is all about.

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Hi, I am Susan Garrett. Welcome to Shaped by Dog. And the question is, "What can we do when training stops being fun?" I mean, I'm sure that when you get a [new puppy home](#), there is a period of time when you think, "Oh my gosh, this is so much fun. I love training with this puppy."

When you get a [new rescue dog](#) home, there's got to be some period of time where you think, "Oh my gosh, I love working with this dog." But what happens when it stops being fun? I think part of the problem is we need to redefine what fun means, because fun doesn't mean easy. But that's not to say learning should ever feel hopeless for anyone.

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And after today's episode, I promise you that there will be a solution for you if you ever get to that place where training feels hopeless. The first thing we're going to do is we're going to redefine what does fun mean? Because dog training can be fun for the human and not fun for the dog. I see that in the sport of dog agility where dogs are sniffing the ground when they're supposed to be going over jumps, they're running off to visit other people, they're leaving the ring.

They might just stop and scratch. And the owner if they can keep them moving, will just keep going to the next obstacle and the next obstacle and the next obstacle. They get their way around the whole course, and they go, "Yes, we did it!" But did the dog really have a lot of fun?

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If they aren't engaged with what they're doing, they're telling you they weren't. Likewise, there are times I'm sure for all of us when we can honestly say, "This is not fun for me." It could be when your dog is perpetually showing fear in certain situations. It could be when your dog is [being reactive](#), being triggered by certain situations.

Maybe when your dog is [over-aroused](#). Maybe you're working on something like, "I'm just trying to get the [dog to tug](#) when I want them to tug because tugging is supposed to be fun and it just doesn't feel like I'm having fun."

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A lot of the times when you're defining your dog training with words like, 'stop', 'don't', or 'not', then it's probably not a lot of fun for you. "I'm trying to get my dog to stop chasing the neighbor's cat." "I'm trying to get my dog to not steal food from the counter." "I'm trying to get my dog to understand 'you don't pee in the house'." That immediately is going to tense your body, send all of the wrong hormones coursing through your body, and you are not going to be ready or able to have fun in that training session.



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So, dog training should be ideally fun for you and fun for the dog, but it's not going to happen every single session. And if you're dealing with a challenge, you've got to remember that a lack of fun doesn't mean that session isn't reinforcing. Dog training can be reinforcing to you without being like a barrel full of monkeys of fun.

Have you ever seen a barrel full of monkeys? Where did the expression come from? I digress. I would like to give you a question that you can say to yourself if you ever find yourself in the midst of your dog training, thinking, "Well, this isn't very much fun." Or thinking, "I am frustrated, I am disappointed, I'm feeling hopeless."

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Whatever it is, ask yourself this question. "Am I learning or am I looping?" If you're learning, then you're going to be actively progressing in your training. Maybe not every single training session is going to have these massive jumps of progress, but you will see a difference in what you learn and a difference in what your dog learned from every single session.

And what that looks like is, you do a little training and then you assess your training ideally by looking at the [video of your training](#) that you had rolling while you were training. So, you're going to reflect on what you see.

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You're going to make adjustments to maybe the environment, to your mechanics, to maybe the [reinforcement that you're choosing](#) to use, or very likely it will be to how big of an ask you had for your dog. If your dog is failing, chances are the expectations are way too overwhelming for the dog to achieve success in the environment that you're training in right now. So that's where your assessment really helps the learning.

Are you learning or are you looping? If you are learning, you're going to be looking at your human mechanics. You're going to be able to recap what you just did, what you just saw on your video, and you're going to say, "This is what I learned.", "This, this, and this will not work in this environment.", "I need to adjust how I do this. I need to adjust how long I ask my dog to do that.", "I need to adjust the [distractions that are in the environment](#) for my dog."

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There. It wasn't necessarily fun, but man was that reinforcing, wasn't it? And when you get many of these sessions and you celebrate each and every one, even though they weren't fun, we were learning, you celebrate them, and you start [stacking these assessments](#) with progress. You get to a place where training is more reinforcing for you and your dog, more fun for you and your dog.

But if the opposite is true and you're not learning, you're looping. This is what training looks like then. You ask your dog to do something, and they do the complete opposite. You put your hands on your hips, you stamp your feet, steam comes out of your ears.

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You go, "Not this again.", "Why do I always—", "Why can't my dog—?" These are signs that you're looping. "When will this ever—", "How can I get this to stop?", "This is crazy. I should just give up." These are signs that you're looping in the midst of your training, ask yourself, "Am I learning? Am I looping?" You can move from looping to learning. It's just a mindset.



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It's a matter of you being proactive and this is what you're going to do. Number one, you're going to stop the training. Put your dog up on the bed, put your dog in the crate, give them a handful of cookies. I don't care if they just did something 100% wrong. You're going to ask them to do an alternate behavior, as in get up on the bed, get up in the crate, and give them a handful of cookies.

While you, number two, reset yourself just with a breath. Deep breath. Hold it. Breathe a little deeper. Hold it for two seconds and then blow it out long. So, for if you breathe in for four seconds, hold it, breathe out for eight, repeat that breath four times. Now we're giving your vagus nerve a little break.

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Next, once you've stopped and you've reset with your breath, we're going to reassess. Reassess as if Susan Garrett came flying in on a drone and was looking in at your training session and said, "Hey, do you want some help down there? Did you notice this about your environment? Did you notice this about your reinforcement? Did you notice this about your mechanics? What else can you reassess in order to get something good out of what's going on?"

It might be that you're trying to train at the bunny farm, and this is not possible to have success there. So it could be, "I need to change my environment." Your reassessment in the midst of the looping is so important.

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And then step number four, [you need to simplify](#). Simplify what you've asked your dog to do, whether it's asking the dog to do it in a different environment, whether it's asking the dog to do a smaller part or a previous step in what you're doing. Simplify so that you can remind your dog what success feels like.

And if you aren't sure even after that, you are at a better place where now you still have a great relationship with your dog. You're not feeling disappointed in your dog. You realized that your dog is just doing the best that they can with the education that you've given them to this point in the environment that you've put them in.

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So, if you still don't know what reassessment looks like, you reach out to your mentor, you reach out to the person who gave you that plan to get you to this stage of training. It's there for you. And if you don't have a mentor, then maybe we can help, more on that later. But what you've got to do is you've got to stop doing what's not working.

That's what looping is. Continuing to do the same thing that you did in the last session and the session before that, and the session before that. You're just in this loop. Repeating something and expecting it's going to end differently. It's highly unlikely.

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Same dog, same affinity for the reinforcements you're using, same trainer that's training. [Something has got to change](#). And a good mentor is going to explain to you not just what they see, but why you are probably in the predicament that you are in.

If you're stuck, you've got to ask, "Who can I turn to help me with this challenge?" You 100% do not need a different dog or a different version of this dog. You just need a different perspective. That's all you need to go from looping back to learning.



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And if I may, if you are watching this video or listening to this podcast episode and you happen to be a coach of dog owners or an instructor in a dog training class, please, please, please take responsibility. These are things that should never be said.

You should never say, "This dog is a little bit stupid.", or "This dog just doesn't seem to get it like your last one.", or "This dog seems a little slower than the rest of the dogs in the class." Those are things that should never be said. They should never be spoken.

Because the truth is your students are a reflection of your abilities and your education. And so, what you can say is, "Wow, this guy's got me stumped too."

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I don't know that I have the answers, but if you're willing, together we can dig deep and find the answers." You don't say, "Your dog's not capable of this. Clearly your dog's not, you've been working at this for six weeks. Clearly your dog's not capable of this."

You would instead say, "We haven't found what's going to work to help your dog understand what it is we need them to know." Just because you don't currently know the answer does not mean that answer doesn't exist.

And chances are you were sent that student because the universe needs you to expand your understanding of how to reach dogs and their people in a bigger way. This is an opportunity for you as a coach or an instructor to remember you are first and foremost a learner. That's how you can help more and more people.

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But for those of you who are listening to me, and you say, "Gosh, darn it, Susan. I don't know who that mentor is for me." Then reach out to my team by writing wag@dogsthat.com with the subject line 'Learning or Looping.'

I want you to write that down, 'Learning or Looping', so that you can remember to ask yourself that question whenever you're stuck in your dog training. Write my team and say, 'Learning or Looping.'

That's all we'll need to know, and we will reach out to you with an opportunity to join our Home School the Dog program, which is a four-month coaching program.

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And if you are somebody who has been through Home School the Dog, and you've seen success and you'd like to intensify your experience with us, write us with a subject line 'Learning or Looping'. But say, "I'd like to upgrade for a year with you and your team. I'd like to immerse myself in this reinforcement based, game-based kind of learning for my dog."

"I'd like to do that for a year, and I want to join Recallers." And we will let you know what that looks like. For those of you who, for whatever reason, are in a position where you have to go at it alone, then I'd love for you to check out this two-part free dog training series [all about targeting](#).

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Targeting is a brilliant way to grow your understanding of dog training while creating targets that can help build your dog's understanding of different behaviors. Breaking behaviors down by targeting different parts of your dog's body. You'll see what I mean if you check out these videos.





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For the rest of you, I hope that if you ever get to a place where you feel you are looping, you have the power now, you have the questions to ask yourself, to change your mindset, to reframe what's going on, to understand that if we can get back to learning, that will lead us to celebrating.

And that leads us to a place where dog training absolutely is fun for dog and their human. I'll see you next time right here on Shaped by Dog.

Join Home School the Dog:

Write to us at wag@dogsthat.com with the subject line "Learning or Looping" for a very special opportunity to join us in Home School the Dog.

Resources:

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

[YouTube Playlist: Helping Your Rescue Dog After Adoption: Success Strategies For Rehomed Dogs With Susan Garrett](#)

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

[Podcast Episode 110: Is Your Over-Aroused Dog Just Over-Faced In Training?](#)

[Podcast Episode 89: Why Dogs Should Not Tug: The Truth Revealed](#)

[Podcast Episode 133: Become Your Own Dog Training Coach With This Video Strategy](#)

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

[Podcast Episode 24: Distraction Intensity Index: Help For Dogs Who Chase Chipmunks, Bicycles, And Neighbor's Cats #24](#)

[Podcast Episode 21: The 5 Critical Dog Training Layers for Confidence with Anything](#)

[Podcast Episode 307: Not Seeing Results In Dog Training? Why Layers Of Learning Lead To Real World Success](#)

[Podcast Episode 301: When Dog Training Doesn't Go As Planned: How To Make Adjustments To Find Success](#)

[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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