

### Speaker Key

SG Susan Garrett

### Transcript

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Today we're going to talk about 10 straw man arguments that you as a reinforcement-based dog lover may have heard, why they're not valid, and what can you do to create genuine conversation with people who uphold a different view of dog training than you, that can be a more productive conversation.

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Hi, I am Susan Garrett. Welcome to Shaped by Dog. If you've ever got into a conversation with another dog trainer who chooses to keep punishment as one of the tools in their toolbox, you'll probably hear things like "reinforcement-based dog trainers are just cookie pushers".

Or "positive only isn't really a thing, it's not possible", or "reinforcement-based training only works on easy dogs, it doesn't work on the problem dogs", or my personal favorite is "dogs need punishment or they'll never know what the difference is between right and wrong."

All of these arguments are what's called straw man arguments. They really are not valid and there's a reason people keep bringing them up. Now first we're going to talk about what is a straw man argument.

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It's kind of like a myth however, it's more of an edgier myth because a straw man argument is when somebody takes a part of your beliefs or methodology and misrepresents it in a way that makes them sound superior or makes you be defensive.

Unfortunately, it happens a lot in reinforcement-based dog training because what we're doing is we're change makers.

We are going against tradition, and change is always uncomfortable for people and sometimes they get downright violent about it. I want to make it clear in this episode. I am not out to attack [balanced trainers](#).

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My goal is to clarify misunderstandings. To open the door, the possibility to actually productive conversations. And I get it. Straw man arguments are happening on both sides of this fence. But the challenge is that they're derailing the potential for productive conversations.

They're moving the conversation away from science and turning us into characters or parodies of really what is the truth? Why are these straw man arguments even here?

Well, number one, it creates clicks. Number two, and it's related to number one, is it is human nature to be defensive when somebody misrepresents you, and so it creates the drama that sometimes people are really looking for.

Number three, by using these straw man arguments, they can actually get some followers who don't have the breadth of knowledge to know any better to believe them.

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So, let's start off with the one probably heard the most commonly is that “*reinforcement-based dog trainers are just cookie pushers.*” Why that's a straw man argument because it reduces the sophistication of those of us who have spent decades studying the science of behavior into just a slim, very slim part of what we do.

It ignores all the other reinforcement strategies, including [the use of permissions or play](#), or [the manipulation of environments](#), the [antecedent arrangements](#) of every single training session. And the truth is, reinforcement-based training is a very intentional strategy. It isn't just waving a cookie in front of a dog's nose.

Number two, “*these methods will not work with a high drive working dog like mine.*” And this is an easy straw man argument for people to justify the use of the punishment that they use with their dog. “You've never trained a dog like mine”, and it doesn't matter that we have exotic animals, animals that could kill people being trained this exact way.

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Because it's suggesting that reinforcement-based dog training only works with a particular dog. It only works with the easy dogs. It's creating more of a divide between like pet dogs and working dogs or pet dogs and sport dogs or certain breeds of dogs have to be—.

I get it. Not all dogs are the same. Not all dogs should be trained exactly the same or should be expected to be trained exactly the same. You need to adjust [your strategy of reinforcement](#), but it still works because all dogs have something that reinforces their behavior.

And that's what a reinforcement-based dog trainer uses. And in reality, there isn't a breed alive or an exotic animal alive or a specific sport out there that hasn't had success with somebody using just reinforcement.

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The challenge is the more complex the behavior you want, the more complex the thinking you need. And that leads to the next straw man argument, which is “*reinforcement training takes too long, punishment works much faster.*”

And that falsely claims that those of us using reinforcement have laboriously slow dog training sessions that it takes forever to accomplish anything. Not true at all, not true. And sometimes the reverse is true that if you use punishment to get a behavior, you will continually have to use punishment for the rest of that dog's life to maintain it.

Not always, but a lot of times that is the truth. So, does it really take longer? And even if it did, does it really take longer to teach any skill?

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Maybe, because we have not defined all of the realms of possibility with reinforcement. But what I do know is eventually everything will be learned faster using reinforcement because our strategies are getting better and better every single day.

Next straw man statement, “*dogs need leaders, not more cookies*”, and the assumption there is that those of us who choose not to use punishment are not great leaders. The assumption is that great leaders throughout the world use fear and intimidation to get people to follow them. The best leaders on the planet do not.

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As a business owner, I lead a team of people and that is not part of how we operate at all. So, a great leader isn't defined by how much the people before them quiver. Neither is a great dog trainer who leads dogs, one that must use physical intimidation and brawn to accomplish the objectives thereafter.

*"Dogs need the punishment in order to learn things that are wrong. You can't learn by just being taught what's right."* That assumption is that all teaching needs to have an element of discomfort.

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Not true at all. It doesn't take into consideration things like replacement strategies, differential reinforcement, antecedent arrangements. It doesn't take into consideration people like, myself, who for 30 years have chosen not to use physical corrections or verbal intimidation as part of my dog training program.

Yet, yes, I have Border Collies, but yes, we also have brought in a rescue Bulldog Terrier mix. We also currently have a year and a half old American Bully, American Bulldog, German Shepherd, Siberian Husky mix in the house and a Staffordshire Terrier mix. The strategies work and I say when you have a dog that can tolerate discomfort like a Bulldog, they work where strategies of pain just don't.

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*"Reinforcement dog training only works when the dog can see the cookie, otherwise they don't work."* This is a false narrative that grossly misrepresents a methodology. There are so many things. There are behaviors that I teach my dog without the use of a cookie at all. My dogs wait at the start line, one of the most difficult things, seemingly easy, but one of the most difficult things for agility competitors to get right.

For the last 15 years, I have never given a cookie or a toy to reinforce my dog waiting at the start line, even from the first time they started as a puppy, I didn't use a cookie or a toy to reinforce a dog standing in front of an agility jump.

So, reinforcement training is not just about how well we can use a cookie, and if that truly is your belief, there is an entire world of amazing and exciting reinforcement that's available to you, your dogs, and your students' dogs that you have yet to discover.

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Yes, some behaviors are taught and trained with food, but behaviors are generalized. Food is minimized. New reinforcements are added in place of that. It's a strategy. It's not just a cookie lure.

*"Positive trainers care more about your dog's emotion than they care about getting actual outcomes for you or your dog."* And that reframes our compassion as incompetence. There isn't a need to make a decision between the two. Reinforcement based dog trainers get great results because they understand emotions, they understand the role of emotions and how it contributes to getting those great outcomes that we're all looking for.

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*"Your dog will never have a reliable recall until you correct them for not coming."* Now, in order for that one to be true, we'd have to pretend predictability comes only through fear. We'd have to ignore the fact that since 1992, I have never used correction to teach a recall. And that includes a Jack Russell Terrier, who was a national champion in go-to-ground.

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That includes a Terrier mix that I owned. And yes, that includes recalls off of my property in areas where there is a lot of wild animals. My dogs have never had a physical correction, and yet I would put my recall up against anybody's recall.

Reinforcement history of value-driven recalls, and the strategic use of multiple sources of reinforcement is what creates that drive to have [an amazing recall on any dog](#).

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*"Your [use of a head halter](#) is no different than me using any tool in my punishment strategy." So here people group punishment into any tool that they dislike. That they overlay their strategies on what my strategies would be.*

That they don't consider the difference of a tool based on the conditioning, the history of reinforcement, and the emotional response of the dog when that tool is used and when the dog sees the tool.

A tool isn't inherently punishing until the dog tells you it is. And there's a big difference between using a tool during a dog's adolescent's growth to create positive emotional responses to different triggers in their environment. Then using a tool to punish a dog for making a poor choice.

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*"Positive trainers avoid punishment and the use of our tools like [electric collars](#) or prong collars because they choose not to school themselves in how to use them most effectively."*

Now, this is a classic straw man argument because it reframes an ethical choice as one of incompetence or ignorance.

We avoid punishment because we understand too deeply the fallout and the potential stress and associative effects of using punishment on any dog.

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Straw man arguments are particularly dangerous because they immediately put somebody on the defensive. They shut down curiosity, they trigger rage, and sometimes that's why they're used as a tool. And most of all, they create confusion in less educated dog owners trying to make the best choice for their dogs.

And that's what's most sad of all, because then a dog pays the price for their owner following a sensational straw man argument and making poor choices on the tools and the application of those tools based on fear that they themselves have for the outcomes they want to get from their dogs.

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So, I wish there was a way that I could magically create compassion for everybody. Not just compassion for dogs, but compassion for each other so we could have productive conversations about training.

I don't know what it's going to take, but I do know circulating straw man arguments is not in any way productive or will in any way get us closer to where we want to go.

So, when you're in a conversation and you hear a straw man argument, when somebody takes a part of what you do and twists it around to make you a character and represents your methodology of training as completely flawed, center yourself. Don't take the bait. Don't get triggered.





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You can smile. And say, “Is that a truth you really believe?” You can come up with strategies to have a meaningful conversation with that person, but at the end of the day, you can also just walk away. You can also hit delete. You can also just not engage.

Spend your time in creating more ways that we as a reinforcement-based community can continue to show the world that this is not only the kindest way to train a dog. This is the most engaging and productive way to train a dog as well. I'll see you next time right here on Shaped by Dog.

### Resources:

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

[YouTube Playlist: Reinforcement, Permissions and Transfer of Value](#)

[Podcast Episode 6: The Art of Manipulation](#)

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

[Podcast Episode 182: The Game Within The Game: How To Multiply Your Dog's Reinforcements](#)

[Podcast Episode 302: The Recall Myth: Why Your Off Leash Dog Isn't Coming When Called And How To Fix It](#)

[Podcast Episode 40: Using A Head Halter On A Dog, Why My Approach Is So Different](#)

[Podcast Episode 304: Let's Talk About E-Collars: Why Dog Trainers Are So Divided](#)



## 10 Misleading Dog Training Arguments

### 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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