

This Or That's: Why Most Dogs Never Become Decision-Makers

Speaker Key

SG Susan Garrett

Transcript

00:00:00

The gate to the backyard is accidentally left open, or you're out on a hike off leash and a bunny suddenly bolts across the trail ahead of you, or you're walking your dog in the city and his leash slips out of your hand at the exact moment a kid goes screaming by on a skateboard or a bicycle, things happen in the blink of an eye. And you can't get words out to control the dog fast enough. What we really need—.

00:00:34

Hi, I'm Susan Garrett. Welcome to Shaped by Dog, where dog training makes sense at both ends of the leash. What if one of the biggest reasons dogs struggle around distractions has very little to do with obedience and a lot more to do with decision-making?

Think about the most critical times when you need your dog to make a good decision, when things happen in the blink of an eye, and even if you could respond as a human, you can't get words out to control the dog fast enough. What we really need is for the dog to make a good decision on their own.

00:01:12

And that's what today's Shaped by Dog episode is all about. You see, I think most dogs are never taught how to make decisions, and it's not because they're not capable, or they're not smart, or they're too stubborn to learn. They're brilliant. They're really brilliant.

The reality is most dog training focuses on [sit](#), [down](#), fetch, [come](#), the basics. But none of it involves a dog making a decision. They're just not given that opportunity. Now, I'm not saying those other behaviors aren't important, because they are. But there's a big difference between behaviors and decision-making.

00:01:50

Dogs don't become decision-makers by being shown or told what to do. They become decision-makers by making decisions. I believe this is one of the biggest missing pieces in modern dog training. Today, I'm going to share with you a completely different way to think about training a dog, one that prepares our dogs for when the environment turns [wildly exciting](#) all of a sudden and there isn't time for us to give those dogs a preemptive cue.

All of the foundation of everything I teach my dogs and my students' dogs is based on a series of simple, strategically layered games. I call them "This or That" games. Because when that environment does turn unpredictable, we want dogs to be able to make good decisions in the moment that matter most.

00:02:38

Because when a dog's world suddenly turns exciting or unpredictable, they're not making the best decisions in the moment. They're making decisions based on what's worked for them or what they've enjoyed in the past. They default to the behaviors that have paid off. What I'm saying is the choices that the dog rehearsed the most are the ones they will go to when it matters the most, and that's why This or That games are so very powerful.



This Or That's: Why Most Dogs Never Become Decision-Makers

00:03:06

Every repetition of one of these games is a pathway that leads that dog to understanding that good decision leads them to what matters most in their world. And over time, when you're raising a [puppy](#) or a [rescue](#) dog, or even changing the way you're training your dog right now, if you start immediately, we're setting that dog up to make one or two decisions a day.

Then those turn into tens, then hundreds, then thousands. The dogs have made thousands of decisions on their own, which prepares them to be capable decision-makers. Our dogs just think they're playing fun games, but what they're really doing is building their quick decision-making skills, which leads to a life of more freedom with us.

00:03:53

Let me share a true story that happened to me just a few weeks ago. I was having a conversation with my electrician in my house, and my two youngest dogs were kind of hanging out with us. Now, I've had just been doing some training, so the video camera just happened to be rolling. In the midst of this conversation, I inadvertently knocked a dog treat off of a banister and it fell to the floor.

Now, I didn't know that because I was having a conversation with my friend Joe, our electrician. But my dogs noticed it fall. First of all, Prophet noticed. He alerted to the treat on the floor, and he looked up at me. I didn't notice him, and I didn't notice the treat fall, so then he moved in a little closer, which triggered This! to say, "What are you looking at?"

00:04:42

And This! stood up and walked right over to the treat, and then realized, "Wow, there's a treat on the floor." So, she backed up and looked at me. Prophet kind of circled around to get a better location that he could see me, and that's when, you know you have this feeling that somebody's looking at you, that's the moment that I realized there was a treat on the floor.

It would've been easy for either one of those dogs to just grab that treat, especially when there were two of them vying for it. Now, for me, it's just a demonstration of how I live my life. And my dogs are given the autonomy to make decisions on their own. I don't have to be the one to say, "Ah - ah, no leave it."

00:05:23

Because of This or That games, these dogs have agency. They live their life by making decisions on their own. And that's what great decision-making looks like, when nobody thinks they're training, and nobody has to be there to remind the dogs of what they should be doing.

As I've told this story more than once since it happened, and have shared the video with a few people, the most common question I get is, "But Susan, what would you have done if the dog had gone to eat the cookie?"

00:05:54

And I think a more important question is, why aren't there more dogs that would respond the same way my dogs did? And I believe it's because decision-making isn't part of the current curriculum of dog training.

I think it's time we change that. When dogs don't get the opportunity to make these daily This or That decisions, they develop what I now call a 'decision deficit.'



This Or That's: Why Most Dogs Never Become Decision-Makers

00:06:18

By that, there's a serious lack of meaningful, independent decisions that the dogs have been allowed to make that leads to outstanding reinforcement for them. A decision deficit in a dog doesn't happen because the dog is lacking. It happens because the education is void of those decision-making opportunities.

And I think it's just an unconscious decision that dog owners make these decisions for their dogs. Sometimes a decision is made by over-helping the dog, making sure that every rep they ever try is always a success. Sometimes the decision is made through control, that if the dog makes a wrong choice, you're always preventing that outcome from happening.

00:07:00

And sometimes it's made through correction. Either way, the dog is never empowered with the ability to make decisions that lead to positive outcomes. They're following what we say or what our body prompts. Or they're avoiding what might happen if they make a wrong choice. Neither creates confident decision-makers.

Of course, helping our dog to be successful, it feels compassionate. So, we prompt with our body, or we point, or snap our finger, or we coo-coo, we [lure](#) with a cookie or a toy, we put up props to prevent the dog from making a wrong decision. We see this a lot in the sport of dog agility where we control everything the dog does so that they just rehearse being successful.

00:07:48

You might do things like try to trick the dog by squeaking a favorite toy or shaking a can of cookies to prevent a mistake or over-manage the environment, so a mistake is never possible. Don't get me wrong, I am all for managing the environment to help a dog to be successful, but the difference is I don't make failure impossible, I make it improbable, and there's a very, very big difference between the two.

One allows a dog to make a decision, the other does not. Now, at the opposite end of training will be trainers who train the dog with various methods of lures and props until they decide the dog knows it, and then they allow or even encourage a failure to happen so that they can punish the dog for making such a choice.

00:08:36

Two very different training methods, but actually a very similar outcome where creating a decision-making dog is concerned. Because one prevents a dog from ever allowing a mistake to happen, the other controls the dog when a mistake happens.

But neither teaches the dog to be confident, to attempt to make a decision on their own, and the freedom to fail. The problem isn't whether these mistakes happen, the problem is whether the dog learns to be a confident decision-maker because of the mistakes.

00:09:09

To be clear, I'm not suggesting we just throw dogs into overwhelming environments where they're very likely going to fail. Quite the opposite. I'm suggesting we deliberately design training situations where the dog has autonomy to make critical decisions.

They can problem solve, occasionally making inexpensive mistakes. Inexpensive because there's no corrections that follow that mistake.



This Or That's: Why Most Dogs Never Become Decision-Makers

00:09:37

Allowing them to discover for themselves what pays, because that's where real confidence comes from, and that's what leads to real decision-makers. Agency doesn't mean dogs get to do whatever they want. Agency means they get opportunities to make meaningful decisions.

People hear the word agency, and they automatically think dogs are running amok. There's no structure, there's no rules. It's just utter chaos day in and day out. And nothing could be further from the truth. I've been saying for decades, [positive is not permissive](#).

00:10:10

Meaning you can be a reinforcement-based trainer who doesn't believe in the use of coercion, physical corrections, or verbal intimidation, and not be a permissive dog owner. A great example of this just happened last week. I was out doing some video shooting with my dogs. I had three of my four dogs out there, and we were walking the field.

We'd walked about two kilometers as I did some walk and talks while we were shooting video. I was walking up in the direction of the pond that's on my property. My dogs love that pond. They are obsessed by that pond. They love to swim.

00:10:50

It was over 30 degrees Celsius here, closing 90 degrees Fahrenheit. We'd just been out walking. All of the dogs' tongues were hanging out of their mouth. Do you not think if the pond was ever going to be reinforcing, man, it would've been good that day. As I walked and got closer to the pond, all three of the dogs raced ahead and they teetered on the edge of the pond. Two of them just kept staring into the pond.

My youngest kept going behind those two, getting really close to the edge. All three of them would look over their shoulder back at me. Where am I? Is this going to be a time when I'm going to give them permission to swim? Because we pass that pond every single time we go for a walk. Maybe one in 10 I decide they can go for a swim.

00:11:38

So, my dogs have that agency. Why are they given it? Because I know there's no way they would choose to go in that water without hearing the words, "Go for a swim." Just like when they're swimming and having a great old time, if I say, "We're leaving," they will all come out. My dogs were raised with those This or That questions around things they loved, so it wasn't a stretch for them to learn that you don't go in the pond without hearing, "Go for a swim."

Nobody's saying, "Ah - ah, leave it." Nobody's saying, "Hey, hey, hey. You better not. Oh." There's no threats. There's no physical control. And I'm walking very calmly because quite honestly, I would be shocked if one of them went in the pond. And as they would on any other day, nobody went in the pond until they heard the words.

00:12:28

And what I love best about that is you can see how loose and free my dogs' bodies are. They're not afraid of what might happen to them if they go in the pond. They just know that just like that cookie falling on the floor, that's a choice. I can try and steal it. I wouldn't have even known.

They could have tried to go in the water. And I know the question is, "Susan, what would you have done if they went in the water?" Well, the dog that went in the water I would've called out.



This Or That's: Why Most Dogs Never Become Decision-Makers

00:12:52

And then I would've made a plan for how I failed this dog. How can I create more This or That situations to help make it clearer to the dog that there's never an option of going in that pond without being told.

It's not about me wanting to control the dogs. It's about the safety of the dogs living on this property where there's a pond with no fences. I don't want any accidents to happen, and therefore, my dogs aren't allowed to go in that pond. And they know it, and they understand it.

00:13:21

So, the onus is on me to make everyday training the way I want them to live with me be super clear to them, and be in a way that mistakes, if they happen, are inexpensive. It's not called 'controlled obedience', it's called a lifetime of good decisions.

The wrong choices are never impossible to my dogs, they're just irrelevant. They become irrelevant because of all the good choices they make. And they start being improbable because of the way I set up the This or That games when they're learning. It's a difference between controlling a dog's choices and teaching a dog how to choose.

00:13:55

Today's episode wasn't about teaching you a game, it was helping you to realize that the choices your dogs rehearse most are the choices they'll make when it matters most. It's about understanding why so many dogs struggle needlessly at times when you need them to make good decisions.

And if we want our dogs to make those good decisions, whether it be open gates, or kids running and screaming, or chasing wildlife, or stealing food off of a counter, or jumping on a guest, or anything else that life may throw at them, first we have to teach those dogs how to make really good choices, easy choices, and rehearse those choices daily.

00:14:35

In the next episode, I'm going to show you exactly how I build up This or That games for my dogs and for my students' dogs. Because once you see how to teach great decisions, you're going to look for opportunities to start building them every day with your dogs.

If today's episode challenged the way you currently think about your training, I would love for you to share this with another dog lover. And if you aren't a subscriber here, please go ahead and subscribe so you do not miss part two, where I actually go into the strategy of how to play This or That games, and why they've become the most influential concept in my training. Until next time, stay humble, stay curious, and keep making life better at both ends of the leash.

Resources

[Podcast Episode 155: 10 Ways To Teach A Sit WITHOUT A Food Lure! Unreal Results For Puppies And Dogs Of All Ages](#)

[Podcast Episode 145: 10 Ways To Teach A Dog To Lay Down And How To Shape It Without Luring](#)





Episode: #331

This Or That's: Why Most Dogs Never Become Decision-Makers

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

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

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

[Podcast Episode 78: How to Train a Rescue Dog with Behavior Problems](#)

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

[Podcast Episode 198: What Does "Positive Is Not Permissive" Really Mean In Dog Training?](#)



This Or That's: Why Most Dogs Never Become Decision-Makers

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.



Meet Us Online

Website	https://dogsthat.com
Facebook	https://www.facebook.com/SusanGarrettDogAgility/
Instagram	https://www.instagram.com/SusanGarrettDogsThat/
TikTok	https://www.tiktok.com/@dogsthat
LinkedIn	https://www.linkedin.com/company/dogsthat
Pinterest	https://pinterest.ca/dogsthatcom/
Twitter	https://twitter.com/susangarrett
YouTube	https://www.youtube.com/c/DogsThat
YouTube	https://www.youtube.com/user/ClickerDogs

