



Episode #332

This Or That's: Your Dog's Decision-Making Blueprint

Speaker Key

SG Susan Garrett

Transcript

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Imagine if you presented a child with a very complex algebra equation. Would you expect that child to be able to solve it if you had only just taught them simple mathematics? It's a pretty big jump, isn't it?

Yet too often people expect their dogs to recall off of a screaming rabbit just because they taught them 'sit', 'down', 'come' in the kitchen with some bits of cheese. It's a big gap between teaching behaviors and expecting good decisions.

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Hi, I'm Susan Garrett. Welcome to Shaped by Dog, where dog training makes sense at both ends of the leash. During [the last episode of Shaped by Dog](#), I introduced you to the foundation of all of our training, which is 'This or That' games. It's helping dogs to become decision-makers by allowing them to make decisions.

In this episode, I'm going to go into the five stages of how we teach This or That games, and I'm going to talk about some of the common mistakes that people make. Now, as I progress through this, you might say, "Oh, oh, well, I don't have all of these tools. My dog doesn't know these things."

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I want to say right now that I'm going to provide you with the tools in links in the show notes. First of all, I'm going to give you access to our wait list to a brand-new dog training series that I'm doing that goes into a deep dive showing you exactly how different dogs process decisions.

It's 100% free. It's our brand-new [Recallers Archetype](#) series, moving from a relationship with your dog of 'them and me' to one of 'us.' So that series is 100% free. I'll leave a link so you can get on our wait list for that. And while you are on that wait list, you'll also be given a link to [join our ItsYerChoice Summit](#).

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All of that 100% free. It's because this is the kind of training I know all dogs will thrive doing. And so, myself and my team, we want to give you access to these tools. So, I know I'm jumping ahead. This is something I normally leave to the end.

I just want you to know, as I lead you through the This or That game's architecture, I don't want you to overthink. I don't want you to panic.

I want you to know we've got you. We're going to help you get the clarity and understanding so that you can play these games with your dogs. Why would you want to? Because every behavior our dogs give us gives us feedback on what they know, on what we've trained them. It's not giving us feedback on how brilliant they were born.

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It's not giving us feedback on the limitations of the breed. It's giving us feedback on what we've taught them. Because sometimes what you think you've taught isn't what the dog learned, and what the dog learned is the only thing that matters.



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And so, their behavior is giving us that feedback, our job is to take that feedback on board, not push back against it, not put our hands on our heads and stomp our feet. To take that feedback, take the behavior, and say, "How can I alter my training to help you have more clarity in what I expect?"

And that's what today's episode's all about. Giving you those steps so that you can create clarity for your dogs. Because as I said in the last episode, dogs don't become decision-makers by being shown what to do.

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Dogs become decision-makers by being empowered and allowing them to make really good decisions. So, This or That games are taking one known response and playing it against another known response for the dog. We're trying to see if they can tell us clearly what the difference is between these two words that we're giving them.

One cues one response. The other word cues a different response. It's this or it's that. Dogs learn in pictures, and so the more situations that we can present This or That, the more that dog is going to generalize the behaviors we want to all environments and all situations. Yes, even when they see a bunny and they're off leash and we call their name.

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Once they've been allowed to make good choices, making those really difficult choices become easier. Number one thing that you have to do though, is you have to make sure any This or That behaviors you're going to pit against each other are completely brilliantly well understood by your dog.

And I think that could be one of the first mistakes people make is they think their dog knows something like 'sit' or 'down' because they'll do it when they're holding a cookie. You want to be sure that your dog is keen and eager to show you, "Yeah, I know what 'sit', 'down' means in the living room, in the bedroom, in the bathroom, outside in the backyard, while I'm walking on leash and I see another dog, when a bicycle goes by. I can do those things."

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But I'm getting ahead of myself because we aren't even going to start with behaviors. We're starting with something even easier. We are naming your dog's reinforcements. That is the first stage of This or That. Stage number one of our This and That games is 'Spotlight Choices.'

So, I'll leave a link in the show notes to the [episode where I talk about Spotlights](#). Basically, they are words that are like a click, but they're more specific than a click because they tell the dog what type of reinforcement you're going to be getting, where you will be getting it, and what you should be doing while it's getting delivered.

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So, for simplicity, I'm going to talk about five Spotlights. Three are for food, two are for toys. "Cook" tells the dog 'Freeze, don't move. I'm going to deliver a cookie to you.' So, the dog shouldn't come forward and help facilitate you giving them that cookie. They should wait until it's delivered directly to their mouth.

"Search" means 'leave the position you have right now or continue moving because I'm about to throw a cookie on the floor.' Search is something that creates movement.



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The dog should start moving the moment they hear the word “search” and start looking for a cookie. “Chow” is the third one, and that is, ‘I might put a treat in a bowl and put the bowl somewhere on the floor, and the dog can work. As soon as they hear the word “chow”, they can dive in the bowl.’

And you can have other ones. You might have a Spotlight something like “throw” or “ball”, which means, tells your dog to take off running away from you because you're about to throw a ball or a Frisbee or whatever.

But the two we're going to really talk about today are “strike”, which tells the dog turn and grab onto the tug toy and tug with me, or “bring”, which is pick up the toy and bring it over, and I will play. Now, you could then go and throw the toy. You could tug. You could do anything. But “bring” just means ‘fly out, grab the toy, and fly back.’

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So, there's five Spotlights. Now, why do we start with Spotlights? Because when we're playing This or That games, we want to make sure any failure is incredibly inexpensive to the dog. So, what does that mean? It means that they won't get frustrated.

They won't start, like, scratching their ears. They won't leave work and start sniffing. They won't get frustrated and start nipping or barking or jumping and spinning. We want any failure to be inexpensive. And remember, as I said off the top, your dog's behavior is feedback on what's going on.

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So, if you see any of those behaviors that I just mentioned, take it to heart. You haven't created what we call the ‘[Antecedent Arrangements](#)’ of your training to be clear for the dog what they should be doing. So, This or That stage one, Spotlight choices, we're going to just pit either one of those two Spotlights against each other.

When you're doing this, what's super important is the distance away from the reinforcement you're asking the dog to do something, and [the value of reinforcement](#). For example, this would be an easy one. I could put a cookie on the ground and hold a tug toy in front of my dog and say the cue “strike.”

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Now, the toy is closer to the dog, so it's easier for them to be successful. That would be one way I would arrange my antecedents to help the dog be successful. The other way I would do it is, I would put a very low-value piece of food down here. I might put like a dry boring treat instead of like a big meatball.

Put it right in front of the dog and put the tug toy over here where they'd have to go around the meatball. That wouldn't be a great way to introduce your dog to This or That stage one, would it? Could I do that with my dogs? Absolutely, but they're not at stage one. So, This or That game stage one, keep the reinforcement that the dog is to ignore, a little bit lower value to start, and keep it further away from the dog.

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You can then build up so that it changes, but we're going to start by allowing the dog to show you how brilliant they can be by giving them the opportunity to make good choices.



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Now, what if instead of going for the tug toy, the dog goes for the cookie? They eat a cookie. Now you have to say, "How valuable is tugging to my dog?" And if you say, "Well, Susan, [my dog hates tugging](#). I mean, my dogs only tugged like twice or three times in his whole life."

Remember what I said before I introduced stage one, is we do not include any behavior that the dog hasn't generalized and is brilliant at and shows great joy at in all different pictures or locations. So no, we're not going to do tug and a treat if tug is virtually zero value. If the tug has got decent value, like if the cookie wasn't there, my dog would tug, well, we can help build the value of the tug playing This or That games.

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We will take that treat and we might elevate it onto a chair further away. So now the pressure of seeing the cookie isn't as strong for the dog, so This or That is easy. And once you get tugging, you could then say "search" and run over to the cookie, knock it on the floor, and the dog can have it.

Do you see how these games empower the dog to make good decisions and reinforce them for those good decisions? Eventually, we want to get that cookie off the chair, onto the floor. So, Spotlights, definitely stage one. I could put a cookie in the bowl and then throw a cookie in an opposite direction.

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And I would say "search", the dog has to ignore the cookie in the bowl, not go and— because that's a "chow" cue, eat the cookie out of the bowl. Eventually, I could throw the cookie and hit the bowl, and if I say "search", my dog won't even look at the cookie in the bowl because "search" is a Spotlight that says, 'get the cookie off the floor.' It doesn't say 'eat the cookie in the bowl.'

And it definitely doesn't say, 'Do both.' So, empowering the dog with these [Location-Specific Reinforcement Markers](#) allows your This or That Games to take on a lot more power as we move into our next stage.

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And the next stage is 'Choice Pairs.' Now, with choice pairs, we take a simple behavior your dog knows, like Hand Target or spin or hop it up into the Hot Zone or kennel if they know [Crate Games](#). A simple behavior. It could be a Backup. It could be a 'sit' or a 'down'. For sure I would throw one or two of those in occasionally, but I like to do things that aren't sit or down because they hear those so frequently.

For sure I would add them occasionally, but I don't just do sit or down. So how this works is we take something the dog really wants, let's say it's food. Put cookie in the bowl, and then we have the bowl not close to the dog. The dog would be very close to their dog bed, and I would say, "Hop it up." Get in the Hot Zone.

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They would get in the Hot Zone, and then I would immediately say, "Chow." They could run and get the cookie. That is Choice Pairs. You can think of like an unlimited number of these combinations of something the dog values that you've given a Spotlight to, and a simple behavior that the dog can be successful with.

Once the dog has got success, you can change the order so that the cookie in the bowl maybe is the same distance away from the dog, and they have to go up on the bed before you say chow.



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So, you could do it with a tug toy right in your dog's face. So, it's you know, eventually I could put the toy there and say, "Hop it up." "Oh, not grab the toy? Oh, get on my bed. Okay." This is helping them to generalize the 'Hop it up', which is the cue I use for 'get on the dog bed', which is almost always a raised dog bed for my dogs or a bed with sides on it because that's easier boundary for them.

So, stage number two, high-value reward, simple task, choice pairs. Now once you've done all different combinations of choice pairs, you're going to move into stage number three, which is 'Choice Challenges'. Choice challenges are when we do very difficult things, like you take your dog to the beach, you undo their leash, and they just expect to go in the water. But instead of saying, "Go for a swim," you might say, "spin", "down", "bump", which is my hand target cue.

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Ask for a simple behavior. This one is where you have to go back to, "What did Susan tell me if my dog can't do the simple behavior?" Decrease the value of what the dog sees as their reinforcement. Can you decrease the value of the ocean or the beach? Probably not. So, the second thing was, increase the distance away from that.

So, you might have to go like behind the car so the dog can't see the beach. You might have to start this at home with a kiddie pool if the pond or the beach is way too overwhelming. Set them up for success. If on a scale of one to 10, going to the beach has a history of 'I get out of the car, I'm screaming, she just undoes the leash, and I fly and do what I want.' Well then, you're not going to have success playing This or That games.

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Start introducing them with an empty pool in your backyard. Then put a little bit of water in that little kiddie pool. And then play This or That games. Build them up with that dog's success. The thing that you're going to be noticing as you're moving through these stages is that dogs trained through games, they fall in love with the process.

So, the reinforcement gets woven into the experience of just playing. It's not like everything is reserved for the end for the dog. The process becomes very reinforcing. I used to have a dog who was obsessed with the pond.

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His name was Buzzy. And he loved to go in the pond. And I've told [the story about Buzz](#) in the past, where he would go in the pond and if I let him, he would swim for 30 minutes, 40 minutes. Like, he would just swim.

But when I helped him to understand that you have to wait to be invited to go in the pond with a cue "Go in the pond", and then I would call him out and let him go back in, the game became 'Mom, send me in the pond.'

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So instead of swimming for 30 minutes, he started swimming for like a minute, and then he'd get out on his own and say, "Okay, can you send me again?"

So, I had to start reinforcing him for staying in longer because the game of being given permission to go was so much more powerful to him.



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And that's what happens when you're working through all the stages of This or That games. Confidence in dogs playing This or That games is demonstrated so well that success is inevitable.

Stage four, 'Choice Chains'. That's where we can add more than one game to the dog. So, I might put the tug toy out and say "spin", and then the dog spins, and they might think, "Oh, now I get to have the toy." But then I might say "down", and then I'll say, "get the toy."

My 15-and-a-half-year-old dog, Swagger, he loves it if I add 15 or 20 behaviors before he's allowed to get his toy.

Now, at this stage, most of the behaviors are the same thing because some of the, like, I don't ask him to spin, and I don't ask him to sit. Some of the behaviors are harder for him because his body isn't as strong as it used to be. But he likes it a lot better when I add more pieces to the chain than just getting the reward.

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Because just like I said, the dogs fall in love with the process. It's not all about getting the end reward. So, when you're doing a chain, remember, as I said off the top, we never add any behavior that the dog doesn't know brilliantly.

So, I will do this with my puppies when I'm doing agility. I'll take a cone. Well, they know how to wrap a cone, and I'll present them with a toy in a way that physically looks like I'm saying, "Yeah, tug with me." But instead of tug with me, I'll say their wrap cue, "wrap, wrap, wrap", which means wrap the cone.

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And they'll just about come in and then, "oh yeah, wrap the cone." And once they're done wrapping, then I'll say "strike", and they can grab the tug toy. So how do you know how many elements to add to the chain? Behavior is communication.

We don't want this to be a laborious, "Oh, I'm doing it." If I had a dog who wasn't confident, I wouldn't ever grow a chain.

I would stay at choice pairs as long as I need to. Maybe if the dog was brilliant at some stages, I would go to choice challenges, but I would not go to choice chains until I had snappy behaviors from my dog. And then you can add a number of behaviors. For example, in our Recallers program, we have a game called The Wow Game.

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It's very late in the program that we introduce it because we have to bring all of our students through all five layers of This or That games.

But they'll get to a place where with choice challenges, and choice chains are part of choice challenges, they're growing choice challenges, a lot of the high-value reward comes from the expectation to do something.

So, when you are at the beach, there is an expectation that I will swim. When you throw a toy, there is an expectation that now you will let me go get the toy. But we might release the dog to the toy, and before they get there, we'll say "sit".

And if we're working on a choice chain, we might then say "spin" or "back" before we say, "bring me" and they grab the toy and come back to us.



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There's a number of things that you can add. I would add "sit pretty" with Swagger. Sometimes I would add all kinds of craziness because he loved The Game of Wow. And by the time you get to choice chains, you have a dog who rarely makes mistakes because those mistakes are embraced.

They don't fear being wrong, ever. They understand that a mistake is just an elimination of a possibility, so the next one is going to bring them closer to getting that final reward. The process of This or That games doesn't just test what the dog knows, it's teaching the dog how to think.

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It's empowering the dog to be a decision-maker. And you can see the confidence growing as fast as the relationship and that interaction between you and your dog does. Because at no point, do we ever help. Helping is taking away the decision.

We don't prompt, we don't lure to the correct one, and we definitely do not verbally or physically correct any mistakes that the dog makes. A dog's mistake is telling you maybe the antecedents weren't set up correctly. Maybe we need to tweak what our plan is.

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And as you work up to the stage of choice challenges or choice chains, we're getting closer and closer to things that previously would've been outrageous temptations to your dog, they're now slowly turning into meaningless distractions. It's white noise. It's not what we're talking about right now. I didn't hear the right Spotlight for that yet.

Once you've grown some choice chains, we're going to the final stage, and here's where you're approaching 'Choice Living'. And this is where you will get to a place where I am with my dogs. If they happen to see wildlife on a walk, and they get fixated and lock on, because my dogs definitely are of the locked-on archetype, then I'll just say, "Hey bud, we're going this way."

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It doesn't require me stamping, threatening, yelling, screaming. It's a simple, "Hey bud, we're going this way." Now, if I kept walking, I think all of my dogs would just ignore the rabbit and come with me, or ignore the deer, whatever it is that's out there that day. But if I'm in a hurry, and I just want everyone to move along, I'll just say, "Yeah, we're going this way." In that tone.

Exactly the same tone. "Hey bud, we're going this way." That's what choice living is like, and that's where I would love for you to get to with your dog. I mentioned I'd tell you what the common pitfalls are, and I have mentioned both of the biggies. Number one, helping. That's probably one of the biggest, is taking away the dog's ability to learn how to make a decision by helping them.

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Like, they're about to fail, and so you prevent failure from happening. Helping is a biggie. Obviously, any kind of correction is a biggie. Growing a chain before the individual pieces are known and well-loved, if the dog gets joy from doing those behaviors. I wouldn't add them to a choice chain till the dog really knows and understands and loves doing them.

So those are the biggies. The third one, I would say, is adding too many pieces to a chain before the dog is excited by the process. So, keep it to choice pairs or choice challenges. Do not grow into choice chains until the dog is amped about playing your game. We never, while we're progressing through these five stages, we never want to sacrifice joy just for the opportunity to move ahead.





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Your dog's behavior will tell you when they're ready to move ahead. As I mentioned off the top, over the next coming weeks and months, I am going to be sharing how This or That games fit into the bigger picture of creating a relationship of cooperation with your dog.

We will be releasing our brand-new Recallers Archetype series, 'Growing from Me and Them' to 'Us', later at the end of the summer. I would love for you to be a part of it, and you can do that by clicking the link in the show notes and [getting on the wait list](#).

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And that also will give you the opportunity to join our ItsYerChoice Summit, which will get you started on Spotlights, and the game of ItsYerChoice. I hope the architecture of This or That games makes sense. I hope how you flow through the games makes sense.

If you have any questions at all for me on This or That games, how they could work for you and your dog, please jump over to [our YouTube channel](#), leave a comment or a question there, and while you're there, please give us a like, and be sure to subscribe to the channel.

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Because we have powerful training videos because we want the world to be a more cooperative and empowering place for all dogs. And as always, be curious, be humble, and keep making life amazing at both ends of the leash. I'll see you next time right here on Shaped by Dog.

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[Podcast Episode 327: Beyond "Yes" And "Good": Why Your Dog Needs "Spotlights"](#)

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

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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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