



A dog should not be disciplined or rewarded if he does not fully understand why he received the reward or the punishment. The trainer may know why the dog was rewarded or corrected, but if the dog does not make the connection, it is detrimental to his learning. This is a “not to be broken” rule that applies to all areas of canine training. Whether training a dog for the agility arena, the obedience ring, waterfowl hunting, upland hunting, and/or living in the house as a well-mannered and esteemed family member, a knowledgeable trainer always makes sure that the dog knows why it was rewarded or disciplined.

A dog learns through the process of association. In order for the dog to make an association, a number of consistent repetitions are necessary for the dog to understand and behave accordingly. I wrote “consistent repetitions”; “Here, let’s go,” coupled with randomly issued requests of, “Get over here – I mean right now,” and, “Hurry up, come on,” are not *perceived by the dog* as “must obey” orders. Saying the “here” command one time and rewarding for success and correcting for non-compliance is the correct training method.

Dogs don’t know English, nor can they read their owner’s mind. Training is about how the dog perceives cause and effect. A behavior is reinforced and strengthened when it’s followed by something good and meaningful to the dog. On the flip side, once the dog makes the association that a specific behavior such as growling, barking, jumping up, or giving the owner the proverbial paw to a learned and understood command will be followed by a negative, the undesirable behavior is more likely to be extinguished.

I can’t tell you how many consistent repetitions will be necessary to train a conditioned response. By “conditioned response,” I mean that “the owner would bet his favorite shotgun that the dog will respond with excellence the first time he receives the cue/command, regardless of the situation.” There are too many variables to make a fail-safe statement as to how many repetitions are required before a response to a cue/command becomes conditioned. A dog that has not had to comply with commands each and every time in the past will take more repetitions to learn a new command. Extinguishing a learned behavior is more difficult than teaching a behavior to a dog with no baggage.

A big-time roadblock to teaching a dog to respond to a cue/command is “variable reinforcement.” An example of variable reinforcement would be giving a dog a piece of steak at the dinner table one time and then correcting him for begging at the table another time. Even though the dog was chastised the next time he begged at the dinner table, he hopes that this time he will receive a morsel because he did once before. So if he sometimes gets rewarded, he is willing to take the hit the next time because sometimes he wins.

It is extremely difficult to extinguish a behavior that was learned through variable reinforcement. Furthermore, if the dog receives a reward in the future for a specific behavior – even if that behavior has met with negatives in the past – the behavior will come roaring back.

Let’s take a dog that is well on his way to becoming steady to wing and shot, though not reliably waiting for the cue/command to release before retrieving the downed bird. The owner shoots a bird, and the dog breaks and gets to it. To the dog, the bird was a reward for breaking. This will require more repetitions to extinguish the behavior – don’t bet that favorite shotgun that the dog will be steady in the future. Frequent repetitions of saying the command more than once, not rewarding for success, not correcting for disobedience in a timely fashion, and variable reinforcement are all handicaps to training a reliable dog. A trainer who commits these mistakes will have to put more pressure on the dog down the road if he wants to extinguish a learned behavior and teach a new one. Just as consistent repetitions were needed in teaching a dog a new skill, consistent repetitions of the same, clear discipline are needed to extinguish unwanted behaviors.

It is also probable that the more pressure you use, the more apprehensive to learning the dog becomes – and an apprehensive pupil that’s afraid of giving an effort is a very difficult candidate for higher learning. Any program where the dog receives more pressure and punishment is not effective to developing a dog that responds reliably with excellence and style. ●

Check out George’s video training series, available from *The Pointing Dog Journal’s* Video Library. The series covers everything you need to know to take your pointing dog from a pup to a finished hunter. For more information on The George Hickox School of Dog Training for Owners and their Dogs, and Stonecreek English setters, pointers, and Labrador retrievers, check out www.georgehickox.com.