



THE FOUR PRINCIPLES OF OPERANT CONDITIONING

Operant conditioning is called that because the subject, in this case the dog, "operates" on, or controls, the environment by his behavior. He chooses to behave in a certain way based on his expectations of the consequences of his behavior. His behavior may make a good thing happen, a good thing go away, a bad thing happen, or a bad thing go away. Since all living things want good stuff and want to avoid bad stuff, the dog will choose behaviors that make good things stick around and make bad things leave. We use this concept in training by applying one or more of the four principles of operant conditioning:

1. Positive Reinforcement (R+) - The dog's behavior makes a good thing happen; behavior increases as a result. Example: Dog sits, you "Click!" and give him a treat; dog sits more often.

2. Negative Punishment (P-) - The dog's behavior makes a good thing go away; behavior decreases as a result. Example: Dog jumps up to grab a Frisbee™ from your hand. You hide the disc behind your back. Dog stops jumping and sits - you throw the disc for him. (Negative punishment is most effective when it's followed by positive reinforcement for a desirable behavior that replaces the undesirable one - in this case sitting makes a good thing happen - you throw the Frisbee™ for him to chase.)

3. Positive Punishment (P+) - The dog's behavior makes a bad thing happen; behavior decreases as a result. Example: Dog jumps up - you grab his front paws and squeeze; jumping up decreases. The fallout may be that he decides he doesn't like you touching his paws, and becomes resistant to and/or aggressive about having his nails trimmed and his feet examined.

4. Negative Reinforcement (R-) - The dog's behavior makes a bad thing go away; behavior increases as a result. You pinch your dog's ear (bad thing) to force him to pick up his dumbbell (a commonly used old-fashioned training technique known as the "ear-pinch"). He opens his mouth to protest the pinch and you pop the dumbbell into his mouth and stop pinching. Opening his mouth for the dumbbell makes the pinch go away. Again, the fallout may be that he becomes very sensitive to having his ears examined and/or handled.