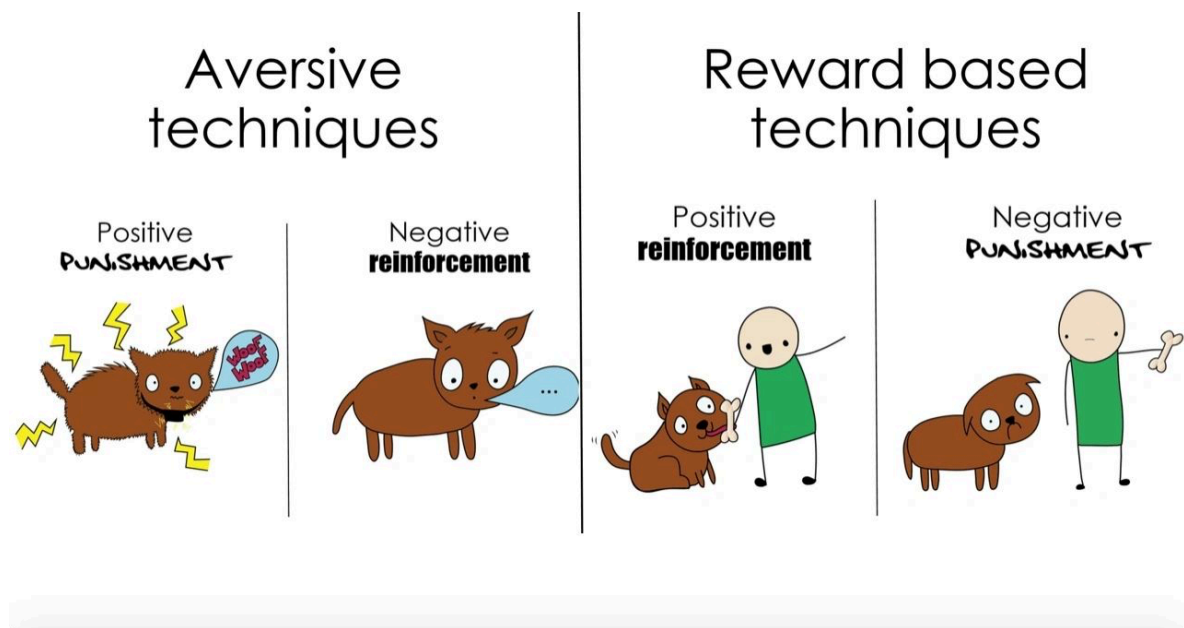


# What is positive reinforcement?

## LARGE PRINT VERSION

7 September 2024 | Animal Care,  
Behaviour, Medical, Rescue  
Policy and Advice



The term 'positive reinforcement' hides no big dog training secrets although it can sound daunting.

It's all about treating your dog with **respect** and, just even more importantly, **consistency**, and not **immediately punishing** your dog for a mistake they made.

While positive reinforcement's success is not 100% guaranteed and it depends on the dog's breed (mix) nature and life before they came to you, what we do know is **punishment definitely doesn't work.**

Now respect is a fairly easy idea to understand, and so is punishment, but ***why consistency?***

Consistency in

- rules (training and boundaries)

- **expectations** (the image you have in your head of *what a dog ‘should’ do/learn*, and what *a dog thinks their humans will or should be like* or offer them as part of the human/dog relationship, good or bad)
- routines (jobs and tasks)
- or having the same response happening from the human when the dog does something, even if, **and especially if**, the *human is annoyed by the dog’s conduct*

is the bedrock on which a well-behaved and happy dog is built, who has a healthy relationship with their human(s). By

consistently applying the *same commands, rewards, and corrections not based in fear, that suit your dog* (which can take some trial and error to work out), *you send clear signals to your dog*, and provide them with a 'default' of what to do to be a good dog in all sorts of situations, reducing their stress and making it easier for them to understand what is expected of them.

### **What is positive reinforcement?**

For humans it's as simple the art of taking a deep breath and keeping your body language relaxed (as your dog DOES know your body language and



expressions!) before you react to a dog's behaviour ***you*** find a problem, and try and divert or distract them into doing something you find less of a problem. For example, if your dog chews the table leg, bring them away by using a toy or treat they like, then rewarding them when they don't go back to that fascinating bit of furniture. For a dog, it's a way of communication with their human that is positive and not based on fear or stress of getting things wrong. Dogs chew, dig and bark. It's normal to them, and not 'bad' at all. The idea is to get them to only do these things to toys, have something like a sand pit for digging or snuffing

out toy and treats, or only to alert/play when they bark rather than fear barking or reactive barking that goes on for some time.



signs of stress to look out for in  
your dog

So instead of punishing or  
'disciplining' your dog when what  
you consider bad behaviours

occur, focus on when they are a 'good dog' and give appropriate rewards. This tells your dog they did well and increases the likelihood they will repeat the action. It can be some controlled play (see our play blogs [here](#) and [here](#) ) as sometimes time with their human(s) is all the dog wants; a walk, (provided their stress buckets are nice and empty (see our [stress blog](#))); cuddles (if they're not using them to fear bond, like we talk about in [this blog](#)), treats (in moderation, and scaled from low value like biscuits to high value like meat treats) depending on how much you feel they are being a 'good dog'. The

dog usually soon sees which behaviours you value the most and start to act accordingly, over time.

That sounds pretty easy when you say it, but not so easy in practice.

Very true!

Sometimes the temptation, when they've widdled up your work bag again or destroyed your shoes again, is to show them what they've done is bad or unwanted behaviour in your mind, with pointing to the item or the dog (not a good idea- they'll just look at your finger!) or putting the item

under their nose and using words like 'was this you?' Or 'naughty dog!' in a hard, loud or disapproving tone. But this doesn't make you feel better, as the dog just looks worried and can't tell you why they did it, and the dog definitely doesn't feel better; in fact they're a lot more likely to just do it again but behind your back, to avoid the shouting.



We have ways we recommend to use words and tone to communicate with your dog in the 'it ain't what you do it's the way that you do it' blog and there's also a good article on it [here](#). but here we're going to try and help you communicate with your dog with good body language, tone

and behaviours in combination. And it does need quite a change of mindset on the humans' part, especially if you've had dogs all your life and are used to being a certain way with dogs that 'seemed' to work in the past.

But times move on. And canine behaviourists have made great strides in redefining and providing a much more healthy framework for you and your dog(s).





## What can I use to establish positive reinforcement with my dog?

It can be a hard concept to get your head round, as the human in this relationship, but it's been proven time and time again in canine studies, such as [this one](#) that dogs respond best to



positive reinforcement over punishment – so get ready for introducing the following actions in your relationship with your dog

- extra praise in a high happy voice
- plenty of ear scratches or fuss they particularly like
- Controlled and supervised play as per our play blog
- Quality time spent with you [see our walks blog] or being close to you in the house if they feel that is a reward
- An activity they like (car rides, learning new jobs in the house and garden like ‘searching’ for things edible or otherwise, lick mats, fetch- but see [our blog on](#)

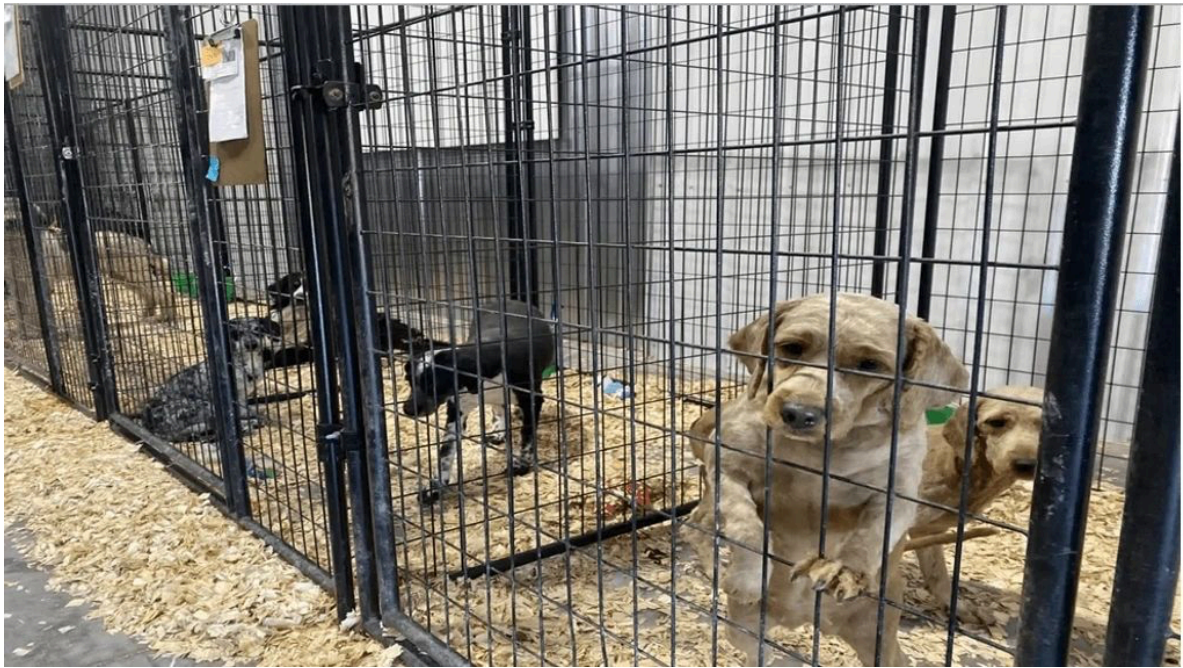
## that for all the do's and don'ts of fetch

- and a variety of treats of different 'values' (for example a dog biscuit is low value; *occasional treats* like dried banana, dog 'chocolates', cheese or home made pup cakes for medium value; and all meat treats for high value

The sooner you do these things after the dog has done whatever they have done; good or bad; the more effective the reinforcement will be to encourage 'good behaviour'.

Of course *different dogs have different tastes and may ascribe*

*their own value system to treats, or rewards, or not be interested in food at all. And it's **not a good idea to rely on treats to train** your dog or establish a good bond as a dog's hunger hormone (ghrelin) can get in the way, or get them overexcited/stressed so the messages you're trying to give the dog get scrambled. Especially if your dog has come from a low welfare rescue where they had to compete for food- or human attention.*



We recommend you use such methods with your dog whether you feel your dog needs extra training or is generally a 'good dog'; or has some behavioural corrections to make- with or without the help of a professional trainer. ***Daily general reinforcing of all the actions you like in your dog is the best***

***way*** to create and maintain the best relationship with your dog, whether they are generally ‘good dogs’ or not.

And if you do use a trainer, make sure they do not have *aversive training methods* such as e-collars, Invisible fence collars, cans filled with pennies or rocks to drop and shock a dog out of their behaviour, or spray bottles, as that could undo all the good work you’ve been doing at home and on walks.

The ideal thought process for the dog, cueing from your reactions and behaviour, and the rewards you give is:

1. I did this thing.
2. I heard a yell that I didn't like  
(sometimes we can't help but shout out instinctively when we find the dog doing something 'naughty').
3. I stopped doing the thing.
4. I got praise/attention/play/a road trip/something nice to eat I don't normally get because I stopped and engaged with my human instead, or transferred my activity to my toys.
5. If I do that thing I get yelled at but if I stop I do not.
6. I will not do that thing.





happy dogs will let you with their faces and body language, just like a stressed dog.

We totally understand that training a dog, especially, a puppy or a dog from a rescue or breeding situation who hasn't been trained at all, can be challenging and frustrating but,

don't give up! All too often we see dogs get rehomed all over social media because of behaviour issues that resulted because of simply not understanding how to get the best out of your dog, so never feel ashamed to ask in your rescue support live chat for advice from our team, or get a trainer in who uses modern, healthy methods to train.





look at how the dog is focused on the trainer they trust. They expect the trainer not to do upsetting things, and to make any new things non-threatening and safe.

*Covid lockdowns as discussed here in our blog haven't helped either and we have seen in general as a rescue, a frightening*

surge in severe behaviour problems since the pandemic, as many owners didn't take the time to *establish the ground rules, socialise or properly train* their dog before going back to work and no longer having time to do as many activities with the dog whenever the dog asked. Instead, the dog got *unstructured 24/7 attention* and taken out on way too many walks as outdoor exercise was allowed in lockdown provided social distancing happened, as the humans were home all the time, and the dogs had no value system in place at all. To avoid this issue, **our rescue** will have provided and continues to provide **advice and**

**support**; as well as all of our **blogs** of course; available in printable and large print PDFs, on how to incorporate some **simple dog training** tips at home and when out and about.

## What benefits am likely to see if I use positive reinforcement?

### Communication

Negative reinforcement (shouting, hitting with a newspaper, ‘rubbing their nose in it’, walking on super tight lead on a collar and not a harness) only makes your dog scared of you. Dogs are usually very eager to please their owners, and positive reinforcement lets them know

their behaviour was good so they get a solid indication or set of mental rules of how to make you happy. It usually results in an *eager dog that is easy to teach and wants to listen and learn 'jobs' appropriate to their breed mix and characters*. And when a dog knows the 'correct behaviour' it makes the humans happier too. Positive reinforcement *teaches a dog to dislike the same behaviours you dislike*, establishing a method of communication that works for you both, where you can meet in the middle as you start to 'think more dog'.

## A Healthy Bond

One of the *main expectations* humans have for their dogs is to be a 'friend' and 'companion' that is 'part of their family'. The strategy of positive reinforcement helps reinforce that bond, providing your dog with *a level of confidence and trust in you* that they will not have when they first come home. **Most dogs have no clue how to be your friend or new family member when they first come home** so it's your job to show them what that means. *A professional trainer can only do so much-* they can teach your dog how to behave and follow basic commands, but positive reinforcement by an owner leads to a strong

relationship built on mutual understanding and love.



you can tell by how a dog looks at you if they are engaged and listening. And if their head's on one side they are usually really concentrating on you!

Mental Stimulation/Boredom

## Prevention

A lesser-known fact about dogs is that boredom is a significant contributor to behavioural issues, with them acting out in ways such as *digging or chewing objects* other than their toys, or having *separation anxiety*.

Training with positive reinforcement and consistently showing them what '*jobs*' you want them to do as talked about above, keeps them engaged and their *boredom and stress levels*

*lower.* **Daily training sessions** that divert them from any 'bad behaviour', repeat their 'good behaviours' and result in play sessions, walks, or fuss burn off stress-energy and keep them

occupied. **We don't recommend crate training** as we deal with rescue dogs who've usually not had good experiences with cages, but of course one of your expectations is not coming home to a chewed up house, or anxiety-toileting indoors, and stairgates in doorways are a much better alternative if you prefer to limit your dog's free roam when you are out, with access to dog safe toys or comfort items like a dog bed or blankets (but never leave a dog unsupervised with a long lasting chew treat).

### Consistency and Patience

We've already talked about the benefits of *consistent behaviour*



*and cues from the humans* but did you know it also helps your dog to be more patient and often be less demanding with their needs at times that don't work for you (while you're trying to cook dinner, or if you work from home.) However, **dogs are creatures of habit, live in the moment, and they don't possess a great deal of patience naturally.**

So the ***whole regular resident and visiting family or friend set up has to be on board*** with the training and needs to be part of the process, handling the *training the same way and offering the same rewards* for the same behaviour. Over time, (and yes this is **NOT an instant fix**) this

will be rewarded by your dog consistently exhibiting *positive behaviours with everyone in the home*, rather than bonding only to one human- which we call **monobonding** (see [this blog](#)) and is not something you should encourage.



if your dog looks like this, BACK  
AWAY and give them space- ALL  
of you! Let them have some  
room.

They'll also learn patience since the start to understand and trust that a reward will come as long as they continue the good behaviour. This is another reason why an *instant treat or a treat every time is not to be relied on* especially long term for 'good behaviour' as the food itself can mess up the lesson you are trying to show your dog, or be more of a 'bribe' than a reward, leading them to only 'behave' when they're given food. ***And people***

*coming into your home, or on visits, need to ask if it's OK with you before they get the treat bag out!*

## What Happens When You 'Punish' A Dog?

Punishment is a very human idea, whereas dogs 'correct' other dogs' behaviour they feel is unacceptable (being too friendly/ playing 'too hard' etc). Dogs don't have courts, or jails. So for dogs, any kind of punishment especially when you don't/can't react **immediately** (say, you were out when they did the thing) means *they easily misunderstand* what they're being

told off for.

For example, one of the '*worst things you usually have to deal with as a human, is dogs toileting indoors.* So having an accident on the living room carpet can make a human shout in frustration, and putting them in a *time out away from you* might seem like the reasonable thing to do. However, that dog may interpret those consequences as meaning it's **not acceptable to toilet in that particular spot, or in front of you**, so they will start *hiding their accidents in random places* around the home.



They're about to go!! How do you stop this without shouting?

Another issue can be *destructive chewing* which can be done through *frustration, boredom or anxiety* so it's your job as the human to work out which it is, without yelling, else they'll just wait till you're out of the room to do it. Spraying items with bitter apple (not electricals) can help

the thing taste nasty next time, but prevention is better than cure. Make sure *anything you don't want chewed* is *out of reach or put away* till they learn what is ok and not ok to chew. Of course this is harder to do with big and heavy items like furniture or flooring, so having them somewhere without those *temptations* could be the way to go while they **learn the house rules and become less stressed.**

So 'punishment' creates a communication issue, which causes stress, and which positive reinforcement will have to work harder to 'untrain'.

What should you do instead?

**Immediately take them**

**outside** even if you've come home to the mess, or down from sleeping or another room and found mess. This shows them that is the right place for them to go to the toilet. You may be out there with them for some time! When they do eliminate outside, reward and praise them.

Dogs rely on your tone more than what you say, although many can recognise and respond to actual words. But don't expect every dog to be able to know actual words. A dog will hear your 'punishment tone' more if their



word vocabulary is low (and let's face it, other/new languages aren't a natural skill for all humans either!) and feel stressed or degraded just the same as humans do when they are told off, leaving them *detached and unmotivated*.

The words and/or tone you use when you can counter a mistake can become a '**poisoned cue**' and start to only result in negative/stressed behaviour from you and your dog! [More on poisoned cues can be found here](#) when the negative word or tone is accompanied by a reduction of their freedom, like a hard tug on a lead, they

will **hesitate** to do as they're told because **bad things will happen to them if they obey**. And to a dog, a 'bad thing' can be things like being recalled from an exciting smell on a walk to go back on lead with no access to all the good walk stuff, so next time they won't want to come back, or if they feel more comfortable indoors or outdoors in the garden, especially when they first arrive, they are recalled from one or the other place with no decent reward for doing it (it's not dinner time, they are just told to go to bed and not played with/fussed as they like it, or it's not walk time and so on.)

Think of it like this- say if you make a mistake at work, and it resulted in physical aggressiveness or being yelled at by your boss, it would leave you feeling embarrassed or ashamed, degraded, and unmotivated.

Especially if they do it *in front of everyone*. If your boss takes you to one side or in another room, and **explains what you did and how you can do it better next time**, this is a way more constructive conversation that addresses the root of the problem and a solution to avoid it from happening again leaves you feeling relieved, grateful, and motivated. Giving your dog negative versus positive

reinforcement has the same results



if your dog looks like this, let them have some processing time in a bed. Sleep often reboots stress levels, but not always so it's good to keep a 'stress diary' especially when a dog first comes home, so

you can see how they're progressing as they settle

What if I or a trainer tries this method and it doesn't work, or is making things worse?

Bear in mind the *results are rarely instant*. But if you've been doing it for months and they seem to be getting **more stressed, or starting new 'bad' behaviours like constant barking, not/no longer tolerating visitors, chewing on themselves and not sleeping much** (see our [sleep blog](#)) on top of 'naughty' chewing and in-house toileting, there could be reasons for that need to be resolved before you

can go back to 'positive' methods, or a combination of methods.

### Why might it not be working?

- **Too much reliance on food** for reinforcement. We've already talked about this, but it's never a good idea for a dog to get a treat every time they are 'good'. It also 'devalues' the food if they expect it all the time, just like a child who gets what they want whenever they ask. And food can often scramble the message, especially in reactive dogs. Food can stress them out more, or associate being overexcited (like when meeting other dogs, new dogs or new

people) with getting food. What is needed is to address *why they are getting overexcited in the first place* and stop their stress buckets from filling up, which may need **removal from the situation** entirely to **desensitise** them, then carefully **reintroduce and countercondition** them to the stressor, removing them again if they can't cope. *Some dogs will never be super social, and that's ok.* You just need to know where their threshold is and respect it.

- Carrying on from the above idea, your dog may still be reliving trauma from their lives before they came home to you.

We call this Canine Transfer Shock and they're not reacting to you exactly, but rather to an unpleasant memory from when they are younger. Here, again **removal from the situation** entirely to **desensitise** them, then carefully **reintroduce and countercondition** them to the stressor is recommended. Good advice on how to countercondition can be found here.

- The reward isn't strong or **high value enough to counteract their 'need'** to do 'the thing' like chewing those amazing leather shoes, or raiding the bin, or digging huge holes in the



garden. Though digging can also be a result of the **'jobs' they are meant to do due to their breed mix**. If they've come from a **low welfare situation, food will have been scarce** and so bin raiding or counter surfing could be actions they can't help but to do, till they realise their food now (not treats) will be coming regularly and is of high quality.

- You may be trying to teach **too many 'jobs' too soon** after they come home, **not letting them process (sleep) or decompress** between events or tasks, or **tasks that don't fit their breed mix**. Gundogs like retrievers and spaniels for

example are bred to find 'food' (hunted game) and tongue (make an alert noise) when they find it, but not eat it, so you may be causing them stress expecting them to eat whenever they have been 'good'. Or dogs like whippets and greyhounds can find it **uncomfortable** to 'sit' because of their body shape, so you could use 'wait' instead.

- **Dogs aren't robots.** A treat, whether food or not, may have different 'values' on different days depending on how **full their stress bucket is** ([see blog](#)) what the **weather** is like (dogs are very weather sensitive), or **where they**

**are** (at home, on a walk, in a new place, such as a holiday.)

So **learn your dog** and see what varieties of rewards they like, and don't expect them to like the things you see as rewards.

- They may not feel they have **enough space**, or in a situation they can't **escape** from. This is quite common in dogs that have come from crowded kennels. So they may be different on or offlead, or more relaxed when they know they can get past you to their beds (if they're in their beds leave them alone!) or out into the garden. Dragging them away on a lead is no good

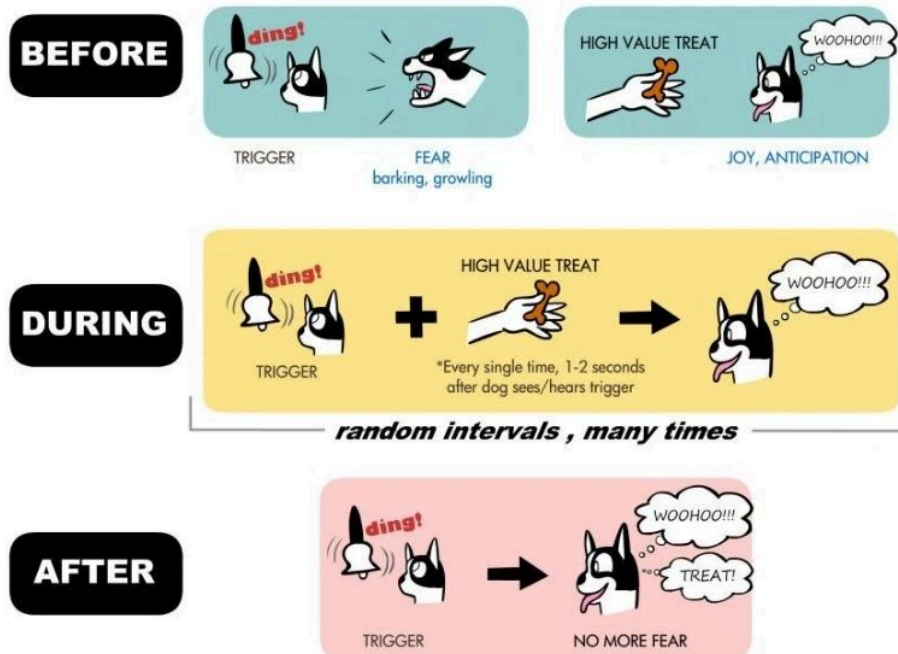
if they're reacting to a dog, good or bad. Much better to turn round and take another path, preferably with as loose a lead as possible. Even 'good' reactions, as humans often think they are, can be them being overexcited or stressed-like jumping up, or wanting to rush over and play. 'Bad' reactions- lunging ([see blog](#)), or hackles ([see blog](#)) are **no more 'bad' than the good ones listed here, it's humans that see them as good or bad.**

- Your dog could have a **medical issue**, so if 'behaviour deterioration' seems fast and not related to their environment, a vet health check could be a

good idea to *rule out any illness or condition*, such as *joint pain or an off stomach*. Or they may have a **level of anxiety** *that only going on meds recommended by your vet, or a herbal regimen, with vet support/advice, or with advice from a canine herbalist* (and we have such advisors on our rescue team plus a shop full of fab dog-safe herbals) would start to solve.

Nine times out of ten, positive reinforcement works. But it's not the be-all and end-all, and if it doesn't work, there are usually other solutions.

## CLASSICAL COUNTER CONDITIONING



Lili 2013

Of course food isn't the only reward you can give, but this graphic shows you one way how you slowly replace a negative stressor with a positive one (not for use with dogs who have food reactivity or food guarding issues, try toys or jobs round the house instead, or some fuss; whatever

your dog 'values' the most).

### **Some further reading**

<https://www.akc.org/expert-advice/news/how-much-language-do-dogs-really-understand/>

<https://www.chicagodogtrainer.com/about/blog/134-yelling-at-dogs-what-we-know-and-how-we-train.html#:~:text=After%20all%20C%20yelling%20is%20a,dogs'%200issues%20in%20the%20future>  
[https://www.dogpartners.ca/the\\_poisoned\\_cue#:~:text=A%20](https://www.dogpartners.ca/the_poisoned_cue#:~:text=A%20)

poisoned%20cue%20occurs%20when,poisoned%20cue%20quickly%20becomes%20unreliable.

[https://www.dogscentric.co.uk/post/why-the-positive-reinforcement-approach-is-failing-you-and-your-](https://www.dogscentric.co.uk/post/why-the-positive-reinforcement-approach-is-failing-you-and-your-dog#:~:text=Sometimes%20it's%20down%20to%20an,more%20than%20feeding%20a%20treat.https://kcdawgz.com/can-you-explain-the-importance-of-consistency-in-dog-training-kansas-city/#:~:text=Consistency%20is%20Key,-At%20the%20heart&text=Consistency%20in%20rules%2C%20expectations%2C%20and,what%20is%20expected%20of%20them.)

[dog#:~:text=Sometimes%20it's%20down%20to%20an,more%20than%20feeding%20a%20treat.](https://www.dogscentric.co.uk/post/why-the-positive-reinforcement-approach-is-failing-you-and-your-dog#:~:text=Sometimes%20it's%20down%20to%20an,more%20than%20feeding%20a%20treat.https://kcdawgz.com/can-you-explain-the-importance-of-consistency-in-dog-training-kansas-city/#:~:text=Consistency%20is%20Key,-At%20the%20heart&text=Consistency%20in%20rules%2C%20expectations%2C%20and,what%20is%20expected%20of%20them.)

[https://kcdawgz.com/can-you-explain-the-importance-of-consistency-in-dog-training-kansas-city/](https://kcdawgz.com/can-you-explain-the-importance-of-consistency-in-dog-training-kansas-city/#:~:text=Consistency%20is%20Key,-At%20the%20heart&text=Consistency%20in%20rules%2C%20expectations%2C%20and,what%20is%20expected%20of%20them.)

[#:~:text=Consistency%20is%20Key,-](https://kcdawgz.com/can-you-explain-the-importance-of-consistency-in-dog-training-kansas-city/#:~:text=Consistency%20is%20Key,-At%20the%20heart&text=Consistency%20in%20rules%2C%20expectations%2C%20and,what%20is%20expected%20of%20them.)

[At%20the%20heart&text=Consistency%20in%20rules%2C%20expectations%2C%20and,what%20is%20expected%20of%20them.](https://kcdawgz.com/can-you-explain-the-importance-of-consistency-in-dog-training-kansas-city/#:~:text=Consistency%20is%20Key,-At%20the%20heart&text=Consistency%20in%20rules%2C%20expectations%2C%20and,what%20is%20expected%20of%20them.)



<https://packleaderdogs.com/the-positive-reinforcement-only-propaganda/>

<https://www.preventivevet.com/dogs/dog-training-aversives>

<https://>

[www.rauanimalhospital.com/resources/blog/dogs/secret-dog-training-why-positive-reinforcement-works-punishment-doesnt](http://www.rauanimalhospital.com/resources/blog/dogs/secret-dog-training-why-positive-reinforcement-works-punishment-doesnt)

<https://somuchpetential.com/research-why-use-positive-reinforcement-in-dog-training/#:~:text=As%20many%20as%2065%25%20of,in%20the%20positive%20reinforcement%20class.>

<https://vcahospitals.com/know-your-pet/introduction-to->

# desensitization-and- counterconditioning