

HISTORY

History of learning theory in dog training:

Around the beginning of the 20th Century, Ivan Pavlov was studying the digestive system of dogs in Russia. While doing this work he discovered that the appearance of the human bringing food to the dogs caused the dogs to salivate. He then began ringing a bell immediately prior to presenting the food; the dogs then began salivating when they heard the bell. From this came our knowledge of classical conditioning. Classical conditioning deals with associations -- a neutral stimulus (the bell -- a stimulus that has no actual value) provokes a reflex reaction (salivation). Notice that this is a **reflex** action -- the dog does not have control over his reaction.

A few years later, B.F. Skinner discovered that he could change the way rats behaved by giving the rats a food reward when they pressed a lever. There's still an association taking place -- the rat understands that by pressing the lever he'll get food, but rather than the stimulus **predicting** something happening, the behavior **causes** something to happen. This is called operant conditioning. An example would be when your dog lays his head on your knee, looks at you with sad eyes, and you pet him. The dog is operating on his environment -- he does something which will make something else happen.

There were many studies going on around the same time by different people: however, these two men made huge contributions to what we now know about how animals learn.

Although animal trainers have been using positive reinforcement methods for a long time, it is fairly new to the dog training arena. Formal dog training -- particularly for pet dogs -- began in earnest after the two World Wars.

Men who had trained war dogs for the military realized that they had a marketable skill, and began holding dog training classes. Unfortunately, they brought their harsh methods with them. We must remember that the attributes that make a good war dog are not the same attributes you want in a pet dog. In war dog training they tried to weed out the weaker dogs, but an assertive, domineering dog is not appropriate for a family situation. Also, when training war dogs they didn't have time to work with the dogs they needed immediate results. These factors resulted in some very harsh training methods.

It wasn't until the 1980s that positive reinforcement training for dogs began to be explored in a serious way. We can thank two people for this: Dr. Ian Dunbar and Karen Pryor. Ian Dunbar began holding seminars, making videos

and writing books promoting the use of food in dog training. Karen Pryor, who had trained marine mammals, wrote a book called "Don't Shoot the Dog." This book brought the principles of operant conditioning to dog trainers. Karen Pryor also introduced trainers of all kinds of animals to clicker training.

Since then, positive reinforcement training has grown by leaps and bounds. Like Ma & Paw Kennel, not all positive trainers use clickers, but most of them use the principles of operant conditioning.