

UNDERSTANDING HOW PUPS LEARN

by Stacy Greer, CPDT-KA, FFCP with Sunshine Dog Training & Behavior

The **essential guide to understanding how dogs actually learn.** This covers operant and classical conditioning, reward-based training, **and why thoughtful training replaces corrections.** Learn how behavior is shaped so you can train with clarity, confidence, and intention.



Copyright © 2025 | All rights reserved

CLASSICAL CONDITIONING

Classical conditioning is learning by association, where one thing predicts another and creates an automatic or emotional response.

WHAT IS CLASSICAL CONDITIONING?

Classical conditioning is learning through association, first described by physiologist [Ivan Pavlov](#). In dog training, it happens when you consistently pair something a pup naturally cares about (*food*) with something neutral (*the sound of a clicker*) until they become linked in the dog's mind.

Unlike training a pup cues and behaviors, which teaches a pup to make a conscious choice, **classical conditioning creates an automatic, emotional, or reflexive response**. Over time, the once-neutral trigger alone can produce the reaction because the pup has learned what it predicts.



WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE

- **Unconditioned stimulus:** Food
- **Unconditioned response:** Excitement
- **Conditioned stimulus:** Treat jar sound
- **Conditioned response:** Excitement

No cue was given.
No behavior was asked for.

The pup didn't choose the response, it became automatic through association.

EXAMPLES OF CLASSICAL CONDITIONING

- **Preparing your pup's food** → pup begins drooling in anticipation
- **Leash picked up** → pup starts barking and bouncing in anticipation of a walk
- **Clicker sound** → pup immediately looks for food after repeated pairings with food
- **Doorbell rings** → pup barks automatically because visitors usually follow
- **Car keys picked up** → pup runs to the door expecting to leave with you
- **Vet clinic smell** → pup becomes tense or hesitant from past stressful experiences



CLASSICAL CONDITIONING FOR BEHAVIOR

Classical conditioning **helps with behavior modification** by changing how a pup feels about a trigger, which often changes how they respond to it. By pairing a previously stressful or exciting stimulus with positive experiences, you can reduce fear, build calm associations, and **support more stable behavior over time**.



OPERANT CONDITIONING: UNDERSTANDING THE QUADRANTS

Operant conditioning explains how consequences shape behavior. When a behavior leads to a specific outcome, dogs learn whether that behavior is worth repeating.

WHAT IS OPERANT CONDITIONING?

Operant conditioning is a learning process where behavior is shaped by its consequences, first described by [B.F. Skinner](#). When a dog performs a behavior and something happens afterward—like receiving a reward, experiencing pressure, losing access to something, or encountering an unpleasant consequence—the pup learns whether that behavior is worth repeating.

Over time, behaviors that lead to good outcomes tend to increase, while behaviors that lead to undesirable outcomes tend to decrease.

CRITICAL INFO ABOUT THE QUADRANTS

In operant conditioning, the words positive and negative do not mean *good vs bad*. **Positive means something is added, and negative means something is removed.**

This is where many people get confused. In dog training, consequences can be added or removed to influence behavior. Of the four quadrants in operant conditioning—for me at least—positive reinforcement is used the most often, while negative punishment and negative reinforcement can also play a role, depending on the situation.

Positive punishment is not something I intentionally use or recommend in any of my training. My training approach focuses on building desirable behavior through clear communication and reinforcement.

THE 4 QUADRANTS

POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT

Something is **added** to **increase** the likelihood of a behavior.

Eg. Dog sits → You give a treat



NEGATIVE REINFORCEMENT

Something is **removed** to **increase** the likelihood of a behavior.

Eg. Dog pulls on leash → Pressure releases



POSITIVE PUNISHMENT

Something is **added** to **decrease** the likelihood of a behavior.

Eg. Dog jumps → You say "No!"



NEGATIVE PUNISHMENT

Something is **removed** to **decrease** the likelihood of a behavior.

Eg. Dog jumps → You turn away



REINFORCEMENT VS PUNISHMENT

Negative reinforcement is often confused with negative punishment (*removing something the pup likes, such as attention, to decrease a behavior like jumping*). Negative reinforcement works by removing an unpleasant stimulus when the pup performs the desired behavior, which increases the likelihood that behavior will happen again.

While negative reinforcement can occur naturally in some situations and may be effective in very specific contexts, it is not typically recommended as a go-to training strategy, especially for common puppy behaviors. Because it involves introducing an aversive stimulus before it can be removed, it can create stress or confusion if used improperly.

In most pup training, force-free approaches prioritize Positive Reinforcement (*adding rewards to increase behavior*) and Negative Punishment (*removing something the pup wants to decrease a behavior*). These two quadrants are generally the most effective for building clear communication, trust, and long-term learning between you and your pup.



OPERANT CONDITIONING: REINFORCEMENT QUADRANTS

Understanding reinforcement helps you see how pups learn. When the right consequence follows a behavior, pups are more likely to do that behavior again.

(+R)

POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT

Pup performs a behavior → you add something pup wants.

Examples

- Sit → treat
- Comes when called → praise+food
- Walk nicely → sniff break
- Eye contact → treat
- Goes into crate → treat
- Paws on floor → treats

Behavior increases because the pup wants the reward again.



NEGATIVE REINFORCEMENT

(-R)

Pup performs a behavior → pressure or discomfort stops.

Examples

- Leash pressure stops → pup sits
- E-collar stim stops → pup returns
- Collar pressure stops → pup stops pulling
- Release tight leash → pup stays
- Walk into pup → pup stops jumping
- Harness tight → stops pulling

Behavior increases because the pup learns how to avoid pressure.

CRITICAL DISTINCTIONS IN THE QUADRANTS!

The easiest way to understand the four quadrants is to stop getting hung up on the words positive, negative, reinforcement, and punishment.

Ask yourself two simple questions:

Did the behavior get stronger or weaker? If it happens more often, it was reinforced.
If it happens less often, it was punished.

Then ask: Was something added or taken away? Added = positive. Taken away = negative

And remember—what matters most is how the pup responds, not what *you* meant to do. If something you thought would discourage a behavior actually makes your pup do it more, then it wasn't functioning as punishment at all.



OPERANT CONDITIONING: PUNISHMENT QUADRANTS

Understanding punishment helps explain how behaviors decrease. When a consequence makes a behavior less worthwhile, pups become less likely to repeat it.

(+P)

POSITIVE PUNISHMENT

AVOID!

Pup performs a behavior → you add something pup dislikes.

Examples

- Barks → sprays water bottle
- Counter surfs → loud noise added
- Pulls on leash → leash pop
- Chews shoe → verbal correction

Behavior decreases because pup wants to avoid added consequence.



NEGATIVE PUNISHMENT

(-P)

Pup performs a behavior → something pup wants is removed.

Examples

- Pulls on leash → you stop walking
- Pup bites → leave the room
- Tries to grab treat → close fist with treat
- Plays rough → stop play
- Barks at you → turn back to pup
- Tries to bolt → shut door in face

Behavior decreases because pup loses access to something valuable.

THIS IS NOT: GOOD VS BAD OR HARSH VS KIND

A lot of confusion around the punishment quadrants comes from the words themselves. Many people hear “*punishment*” and assume it means something harsh, and hear “*negative*” and assume it means negative as-in—*not* a good thing.

However, in operant conditioning, these words have very specific meanings. **Negative** simply means something is removed, and **punishment** means a behavior decreases.

So, **negative punishment** means removing something pup wants (*like attention or play*) to reduce a behavior, while **negative reinforcement** means removing something unpleasant (*like leash pressure or tugging on the leash*) to increase a behavior.

These terms describe how behavior changes—not whether the method is kind or harsh.

This is often misunderstood because people don’t fully grasp what the four quadrants are meant to describe, as the **terms are so often confused with good vs. bad or harsh vs. kind.**



REFLECT INSTEAD OF CORRECT

Before correcting your pup, learn how **pausing to reflect** can reveal the real reason **behind behavior** and guide a calmer, more effective response.

REFLECTION FIRST

Instead of jumping straight to correction when your pup does something you don't like, **shift into reflection first**.

Pause and ask yourself . . .

- Why did my pup do this?
- Was it a skill gap?
- Was my communication unclear?
- Was my timing off during training?
- Was it developmentally appropriate for a puppy?

When you take a moment to **identify the root cause**, then you can create a thoughtful plan to **replace the unwanted behavior with one you prefer using**: training, management, or both interchangeably.

With clear training, consistent communication, and good timing, **your pup will begin choosing the desired behavior naturally**—often eliminating the need for correction altogether.



TAKE A MINUTE + RESET

When you **feel your frustration rising**—**pause**. Count to five, stop what you're doing, and if needed, **calmly place pup in a crate with a safe chew and walk away**.

Pups are incredibly sensitive to our emotions and often associate what we're feeling with whatever is happening in that moment; **repeated emotional reactions can lead to unintended outcomes like fear** of you, fear of the situation, or even generalized anxiety.

Staying calm helps you think clearly, communicate more effectively, and return to training with better timing, clearer expectations, and a stronger plan to set pup up for success with future interactions and behaviors.

Taking a few minutes to reset is the best choice so **everyone can calm down and be ready to start fresh**.
Tomorrow is a new day!



BE A YES! PUP OWNER

A Yes! Trainer is someone who focuses on reinforcing what's going right, teaching better choices, instead of correction.

I'M A YES! TRAINER: YOU CAN BE TOO

A “Yes Trainer” is a mindset.

It means I **focus on reinforcing what is going right instead of waiting to correct what is going wrong.**

I do not just stop unwanted behavior. I **teach and strengthen a *better* alternative behavior** until that behavior becomes the behavior of choice.

Pups repeat what works. When calm, focus, and polite behavior consistently pay off, they become habits.



WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

Successful reward-based training means . . .

- Keeping your emotions in check
- Knowing when to slow down and reassess
- Rewarding effectively and consistently
- Reinforcing desired behaviors — a lot!
- Reinforcing calm behavior — not just active behavior
- Teaching alternative behaviors to replace unwanted ones
- Training proactively, not just reacting to problems
- Building skills before adding distractions
- Providing clear structure, boundaries, and communication
- Knowing when something isn't working and changing course
- Setting your pup up for success as much as possible
- Using management to your advantage
- Reading pup's body language and responding accordingly

KIND: PERMISSIVE

The **Yes! Trainer** mindset is **not permissive** — it is clear, intentional, and structured. It **builds a confident pup who follows guidance because they understand it**, not because they fear being wrong.



WHEN IN DOUBT

When in doubt, scatter a handful of treats on the floor and take a breath. If you **still need a reset, calmly crate your pup** with a safe chew and start fresh.

You can do this, you can. **Once you do, everything falls into place!**



A LITTLE ABOUT ME

AND HOW TO GET IN TOUCH IF YOU NEED TO

STACY GREER, CPDT-KA, FFCP

I'm Stacy Greer and I've been dog-obsessed since childhood in small-town Texas.

In 1999, I packed my bags for Queens, NY, to study dog behavior, lived in a Best Western with 2 roommates, went to "doggie school" 6 days a week, and soaked up all things canine behavior, learning theory and ethology.

Fast forward: **I've run my own private training business since 2003**, earned two different certifications: FFCP ([Fear Free Certified Professional](#)) in 2017, and my CPDT-KA ([Certified Professional Dog Trainer, Knowledge-Assessed](#)) in 2018.

I love helping people and their pups live their best lives together.

I currently reside in Arlington, Texas, USA. I've got 3 dogs: 2 Beagles and a Boston Terrier, 3 awesome teenage daughters, and a very patient husband!

[Learn a little more about me](#), [my training philosophy](#) + [how I got here](#).



Stacy



Stella, David, Stacy,
Sophie & Sadie



Charlotte



Betty



Rudy

FOLLOW ME ON SOCIALS & SHOPPING

 [sunshinedogtraining](#)

 [sunshinedogtrainingandbehavior](#)

 [sunshinedogtraining](#)

 [sunshinedogtraining](#)

 [sunshinedogtraining](#)

 [shop/sunshinedogtrainingandbehavior](#)

CONTACT ME

 [sunshinedogtraining.com](#)

 stacy@sunshinedog.com

