

# super dog!



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**W**e expect a lot from Doggie, more than what we sometimes expect of ourselves.

We assume that Doggie's first language is English (or any language that we choose – we may even expect him to be polylingual). We constantly invade his personal space, though we frown when someone stares intensely at us. We demand that he knows the difference between chewing on an old slipper and a new one, we push him to the boundary till he snaps, and then wonder why he did. We confuse him by praising him on some occasions, and when a mistake has been made, reprimanding him verbally or physically after the fact.

**In short, we talk too much, but communicate too little with Doggie.**

One of the consequences of our impoverished communication skills is that Doggie becomes labelled as a "problem dog" and, as a last resort, is sent to obedience school to be trained.

Training a dog isn't just about "correcting" a behaviour that has gone wrong. It certainly isn't about being the alpha in the family pack, neither is it about "dominating him or he'll dominate you". It's also not just about "bonding harmoniously with your dog".

Training a dog is a lot of hard work, and good training methods work because the trainers and dog owners that apply them understand how an animal learns, and what to use at which point to build fluent, reliable and calm behaviours that eventually make up a canine good

citizen. They communicate with Doggie clearly, concisely, consistently and fairly, adjusting their method to his behaviour. They set Doggie up to succeed, not fail.

So how does one train a dog? An animal's learned behaviour is conditioned through 4 ways (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1.**

## The Four Components of Operant Conditioning

<b>+R</b> (positive reinforcement) = does good, gets good stuff	<b>+P</b> (positive punishment) = does bad, gets bad stuff
<b>-P</b> (negative punishment) = does bad, gets good stuff removed	<b>-R</b> (negative reinforcement) = does good to avoid bad stuff

- o Doggie is positively reinforced for sitting when each and every time he sits, he gets a yummy food treat (+R).
- o Doggie is negatively punished for jumping, when each time he jumps, we turn away and ignore him completely (-P).
- o Doggie is positively punished when each time he jumps, we jerk his collar and pin him down into a sit (+P).
- o Doggie is negatively reinforced for sitting, when he does so to avoid having his collar jerked and being pinned to the ground (-R).

Dog training methodology has come a long way since its beginnings in training military dogs during World War I. During the war, it was imperative that dogs were able to withstand the rigors of the services required of them, and hence compulsive training methods were used. These methods were quick but harsh, and because many dogs were unable to complete the training, it gave rise to the notion that only the most alpha dogs were capable of learning.

That is not so, but unfortunately, the legacy of compulsive training and the notion of dominance and being “alpha” remains to this day. Hence for owners and trainers who adopt this method, you tend to see more of +P (positive punishment) and -R (negative reinforcement) strategies. They use choke, slip or martingale collars, and when a dog misbehaves, a leash pop is delivered to correct the dog. The dog toes the line, the pressure on the collar is released and sometimes a treat is given (under the guise of incorporating some positive reinforcement).

A distressing incident I witnessed was of an owner with her Labrador, fresh out of an obedience class. The Labrador was about to pass us, then turned its head to sniff in our direction. A leash pop through the choke chain collar was swiftly given, and continued to be delivered as the dog was pulled away by its stony-faced owner.

### There are kinder and more effective ways to nurture a dog.

Even owners and dog lovers who have not sent their dogs to school, or have “kept dogs all their life” intuitively adopt some form of compulsive training. Doggie has a potty accident in the sitting room while the owners were out. Doggie’s owners come home, discover the accident, bring Doggie to the puddle, scold and may even rub Doggie’s nose in the puddle. When he cowers at the punishment, they think he behaves guiltily because he has learnt his lesson, not realizing that what they have achieved is to have built fear in Doggie. And they are puzzled when Doggie continues to have potty accidents, despite his increasingly “guilty” behaviour at each stern “No!”.

Such traditional methods of training a dog persist because:

- (1) They work. Punishment suppresses behaviour, including the unwanted ones. However, some dogs are more sensitive to punishment and “shut down”, but since not all dogs shut down, people do not see the need to avoid using compulsive training.
- (2) They were used on us. Our society is widely based on

punishment – we get fines for speeding and littering; we are reprimanded and warned when we don’t do our job well. Our society doesn’t sufficiently reward people who (from their own motivation) follow the rules or do their job well. These things are expected, not something to be particularly rewarded.

- (3) They are self-reinforcing and self-rewarding. Exacting compliance with punishment gives the punisher a sense of achievement – of being able to establish and maintain dominance, discipline or control.

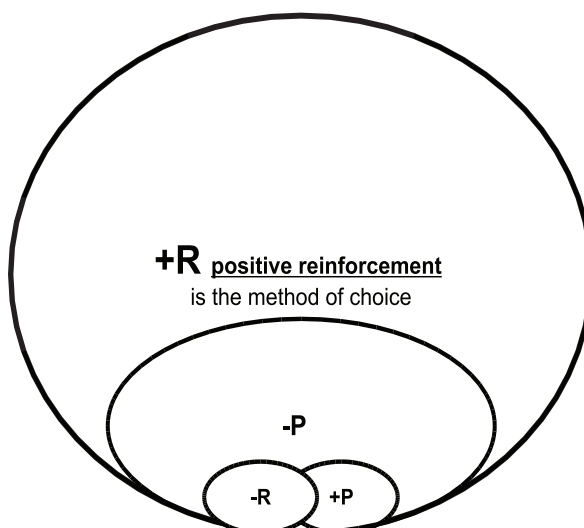
### There are kinder and more effective ways to train Doggie.

Through the work and research of animal behaviourists, animal trainers and enlightened pet parents, we now know a lot more about dog body language, and how it is connected with its learning process.

Ian Dunbar, Jean Donaldson, Brenda Aloff, Turid Rugaas and Karen Pryor are some of the most respected dog trainers in the world. More than that, they were pet parents first and foremost, and they showed other pet parents how they could train their dogs without the use of punishment or intimidation. Instead, through reward-based and clicker training, both dog and owner enjoy training and learning together.

Figure 2 shows a different way of using the 4 components of operant conditioning. The work-horses of compulsive training, positive punishment (+P) and negative reinforcement (-R), are rarely used, if at all. Negative punishment (-P) is applied, but the focus is on positive reinforcement (+R).

**Figure 2.**  
**Looking at Operant Conditioning Differently**



Let's see how a training method based on positive reinforcement works for the case of Doggie, the chronic jumper.

Jumping is a natural behaviour for dogs and is used during greeting displays. Doggie jumps on people as a form of greeting, and to get their attention. Jumping is however, incompatible with sitting (i.e. one can't sit and jump at the same time). Hence, we reinforce sits positively (+R), by rewarding Doggie with praise and a yummy food treat each time he sits instead of jumps. When he jumps, we take away our attention by ignoring him completely (-P). When we communicate clearly and consistently in this manner to Doggie that only sits will earn him both attention and treats, you will find that his behaviour will shift away from frequent jumping to sitting. At the same time as he is learning, we need to manage the situation to set Doggie up to succeed, i.e. we would not confuse him by allowing him to jump up sometimes, and not at other times.

The beauty of using positive reinforcement as the key component in training is that it teaches dogs to learn to learn. Doggie will go through his life, offering all kinds of spontaneous behaviours. Those that we like, we reinforce positively, which means that Doggie would be more likely to repeat them. Those that we don't, we do not reinforce and Doggie would learn to drop them from his behavioural repertoire.

**The result? A dog that stays eager to learn and will work hard to earn its rewards.**

Positive reinforcement training is especially important for dogs that are shy, fearful or reactive. All dogs can, and will bite, when pushed to the limit. It is not effective to punish violence with more violence - my heart always sinks when an owner with an aggressive dog calls me, and tells me that their dog had undergone training with a choke collar. With time, patience and a lot of hard work, an aggressive dog can respond to positive reinforcement training.

**The true "magic" of training is really prevention.**

By establishing a clearly defined way of communicating what is acceptable to your dog, you can take steps to prevent many behavioural problems before they occur, rather than try to salvage the situation only after problems have surfaced.

Training takes place every time you interact with your dog. It begins from the moment Doggie comes home with you, and it only ends when Doggie breathes his last sigh, after enjoying a long, happy life of mutual companionship together. Bringing a dog into your life is to add another member to your family. As a pet parent, you are responsible for Doggie's education, so that he grows from a dog naïve to human ways, to one that is welcomed wherever he goes. Even dogs with model behaviour need maintenance training to keep their manners sharp and polished.

As a pet parent of Kiyō, our Golden Retriever, training and learning together is the way of life for all of us in the family. He sits politely to greet people, and trots over to his "place" to lie down when we're in the sitting room. Trimming his nails, cleaning his ears and brushing his teeth are part of his spa routine. On walks, he carries himself calmly when other dogs bark or lunge furiously at him, and rousing games of fetch and tug always end with happy smiles all round.

Kiyō's nice manners did not come pre-programmed because of his breed – he was a chronic jumper, unruly when he became excited and pulled on walks.

It took good, solid work from Day 1 and ground zero, training as a team to build and hone our skills, shaping Kiyō's manners bit by bit, into the calm, confident dog that we can see. It wasn't always easy, but we kept it fun.

Are we finished with training? Most definitely not! New challenges will crop up as we explore novel adventures together, some will test our skills and push our endurance to the limit. But the chances are good that we will be able to navigate through stormy weather because we have kept the goal of training in mind.

**Training is all about communication between human and dog, and it's a life-long commitment.**

