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Clicker training more complex than it seems

Posted By John Wade

Posted 4 hours ago

Q: We are the owners of Snatch, a 17-month-old male golden retriever. This past June, we decided to take Snatch to a local trainer who uses clicker training. He did well with the basics -- sit, stay, crate etc. Things have changed. Sometimes he will listen, but most of the time he won't.

He has always been a hyper dog and has displayed some signs of worrisome behaviours -- he nips, chews, jumps, scratches, barks excessively, won't come when called, knocks over the kids, growls and has shown his teeth.

We can't have him around when we have guests over -- he is always crated or put in the backyard because he will jump on them and scratch and nip, etc. He spends most of the day in the kitchen, gated off from the living room, because when we let him in, he eats everything, steals the kids toys, and we are worried he is going to hurt them.

We are frustrated and stressed and at wit's end. -- Barb

A: More often than not when people pay for clicker training they are, without realizing it, paying someone to teach their dogs to do tricks. Mind you those tricks are called sit, down, stay, etc. I call them tricks when the end result is a dog won't do it for any longer than it takes to swallow a treat or their owner to turn their back. I call them a job if, using the "stay" for example you can get a guest in and out the door.

Clicker training is supposed to be based on operant conditioning, something attributed to one of the gods of most of the "all positive" dog trainers, B.F. Skinner. This is ironic because Skinner's work very clearly states negative and positive must go hand in hand for learning to occur. Operant conditioning is based on teaching using four quadrants: positive reinforcement -- something is given to the dog; negative reinforcement -- something is taken from the dog; positive punishment -- significant consequence applied; negative punishment -- reward is taken away.

With very few exceptions most of the "all positive" clicker trainers I've met think can teach a dog to reliably come, heel and stay without two of the quadrants that might actually make the dog think twice about pursuing an undesired course of action. That in a nutshell is one of the reasons why so much clicker training as it commonly exists doesn't work. Trainers cannot pick and choose and/or selectively interpret the quadrants to suit a utopic philosophy. It ultimately produces the same sort of results as a speeder deciding she's only going to actually pull over if requested by police in two out of the four quadrants in her city. Sooner or later she's going to jail and in the dog training sense so does the relationship with a dog.

This form of jail is that the dog owner is unhappy because, like yours, the dog is harder to live with, not to mention the fact you can't go anywhere with the dog. The dog is unhappy because, based on all the yelling and screaming of their owner, they can't take their owner anywhere. All parties are locked up in relationship jail. Only because someone thinks the dog's self-esteem will be wrecked when consequence for actions are applied. I know some very good clicker trainers, but the clicker is just one of many tools in their tool bag. Generally it's tucked underneath the word or act of "No."

All positive dog clicker trainers don't raise their children, guide the owners of the dogs they're not training or live any of their life in that way. Only dogs are "special" enough and I don't know why. If I had to be all positive all the time in the raising my sons I wouldn't have two sons, either that or because I'd performed a miracle my name would be up for not sainthood.

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