

Teaching, Strengthening and Performing

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Our work with our dogs should go through three very clear phases, an initial teaching phase, a strengthening phase and finally a performing stage. Of these three phases it is the strengthening stage where we should be spending the majority of our time and energy.

Teaching

The first phase involves getting the behaviour so we can reinforce it. We have a number of options at this point, we can try capturing the behaviour as it is offered by the dog or we can induce the behaviour so it can be reinforced. The most important aspect of this stage is to get the behaviour so we have something to reinforce. In this early phase of teaching we should set up the dog so they can be reinforced often and generously, we are trying to produce a desire in the dog to offer the behaviour a large number of times so we can reinforce it.

The teaching phase should be short. The trap trainers can fall into is that inducement can be addictive. For real teaching to be taking place we need to move beyond inducement. This means we have to give the dog a chance to think and experiment with its learning. This is often difficult for trainers because it means the dog will make errors and we have to let it, the errors enable dogs to experiment to discover what behaviours are being reinforced.

Strengthening

Strengthening is the longest phase, during this time we continue with reinforcement but we start to expect more from the dog. We should expect the dog to be variable in the quality of the behaviour it is offering, we can use this variation to select the better behaviours to reinforce.

It is during the strengthening phase that the cue is attached to the behaviour. When we anticipate the dog is going to perform the behaviour we add the cue just before. This way the cue is linked to an established behaviour.

During strengthening we train one behaviour at a time. It is important that the dog knows exactly what behaviour is being reinforced so they know what to offer. If you train a number of behaviours at once you run the risk the dog will not know exactly what it is being reinforced for.

We introduce distractions at various stages during strengthening. The adding of distractions helps the dog to understand the extent of the behaviour and to be able to generalize it. Remembering that to our dog heeling in a backyard can be quite a different behaviour to heeling in a park full of dogs. It is our job to help them make these generalizations. As we introduce distractions or change the setting we may need to relax other criteria temporarily.

Toward the end of our strengthening we can start to bring different behaviours together.

Performing

Performing involves tests and competitions. Performing happens at the end of strengthening. It is important not to hurry into performing. There are two main problems people experience with performing. The first is they jump straight from teaching to performing, the second is they go to performing with only minimal strengthening. Both mean that a dog is expected to perform at a level they have not been adequately prepared for. As a result the dog gets confused, they don't understand why the reinforcement is not coming as it should. To the dog the rules that you set up, that behaviours lead to reinforcement, don't seem to apply any more.

Strengthening is about setting up a game for the dog that the dog can win at. This means the dog needs to be confident about what it is to do to get reinforced as well as that reinforcement is coming. If we push the dog along too fast the game becomes too hard and the dog gets confused.

Heeling as an Example

Teaching

We induce heeling using food in the hand. The dog is rewarded for being in correct position.

Strengthening

We remove the food from the hand and slowly increase the number of steps before reinforcement. We also introduce distractions like dogs near by or toys on the ground. Toward the end we add turns, sits, stands and drops (these were taught and strengthened separately).

Performing

We test the extent of our strengthening.

