

How Dogs Learn

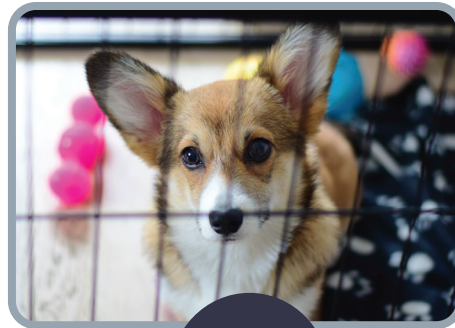
The Key to Training

Dogs primarily learn in two ways. We can train a dog to perform a behavior by reinforcing it, such as when we reward a dog for sitting with a treat. But did you know that we can also modify not just a dog's *behavior*, but their *emotions*? By taking advantage of both kinds of learning, we can change how a dog feels *and* behaves, which lets us address challenging problems like fear and anxiety.

OPERANT CONDITIONING

When a dog learns that their behavior has a consequence, like getting a treat, that's operant conditioning. Behaviors that the dog gets "paid for" will happen more frequently. Sit, down, or come can be reinforced by providing something the dog likes immediately after the behavior. In operant conditioning, a reward is *contingent* on the behavior being performed (i.e., no sit, no treat); that is, reinforcement depends on whether or not the dog performs the behavior.

Although it is sometimes helpful to think of these two kinds of learning separately, *dogs are always learning both ways at all times*. What's more, they learn in these ways both in and out of training sessions, and whether we intend it or not. Keep this in mind when you choose your training methods, and be vigilant about the kinds of conditioning going on in your dog's daily life.



CLASSICAL CONDITIONING

Classical conditioning is learning through association, and it can influence emotions. It's a *subconscious* process in which a dog learns to feel a certain way in certain contexts. A puppy can learn to feel happy about strangers if they are consistently associated with treats. Or, a dog that's scared of their crate can feel calmer if we pair it with things the dog loves. In classical conditioning, the treat does not depend on the dog's behavior.

Written by: Ashley Hill, CPDT-KA

