

Basic Principles of Behavior Modification

Fortunately, adequate training occurs in many sub-optimal conditions, as we are all social animals and really just want to get along. However, there are those situations which require just the right reinforcements at the right time, in order to produce the desired results. At the outset, it is important to understand that every situation is unique. What works for one trainer with one pet may not be the same thing that works for that same trainer with another pet. Conversely, two different trainers with the same pet may have to employ two different techniques. This is due to subtle differences in personality, abilities to emote and techniques of communication between individuals.

These differences are the reasons that there are so many different methods of behavioral modification (BM), all of which enjoy varying degrees of success in various circumstances. Close study demonstrates that all the methods have four basic rules in common. Understanding these rules enables us to apply them and the different methods of BM to specific situations where our usual methods of BM may have so far been frustrated.

Basically, the rules may be listed as follows:

- 1) Prevent unwanted behaviors. (This is especially important when you are not present to reinforce them. All behaviors are to some extent self-reinforcing, i.e. an individual will not do something unless it makes him feel better. Therefore, behaviors will tend to increase in frequency unless there is a better alternative or a noxious external stimuli is applied at the time of the behavior. For example, bathroom breaks behind the couch feel good unless Mom or Dad catches you in the act.)
- 2) Negative stimulus applied at the time of the unwanted behavior. (This is the least important and frequently the most counterproductive rule. It is critical to understand that these reinforcements be given **only** during the behavior or there is great risk that a different behavior may be the one that is modified. Frequently dogs learn that being in the room with Mom when there is urine behind the couch is a bad idea, not that they shouldn't have put it there in the first place. Additionally, the stimulus should not be any more that is necessary, as the animal can become desensitized or worse, neurotic, with overly negative stimulation. Usually, this stimulus really should serve as merely an attention getting device to prepare for the next rule which should **always** follow this one.)
- 3) Change the unwanted behavior to a desired one, ideally one that satisfies the instinctual need that the unwanted behavior was intended to satisfy. (This is critical, so that the pet knows that there is an appropriate alternative to her previous behavior. This rule can stand alone without the first two, i.e. at any time you can direct or lead your pet to do something that you want him to so as to practice those desired behaviors.)
- 4) Positive stimulus at the time of the desired behavior. (This is the most important of the 4 rules. It should **always** follow rule three as your pet needs to feel better about the desired behavior than about the unwanted one. It can also be applied without any of the other three. If your pet is doing anything you like, including just sitting doing nothing, he can, and should, be praised. The more consistently that he feels good about anything he is doing the more he is going to do it.

Finally a word about appropriate and effective stimuli. These are going to vary most between individuals. Negative stimuli should be kept to a minimum. Their purpose is mostly to alert the pet and stop the current unwanted behavior. If this does not occur the stimuli is not sufficient and another must be tried. Obviously in the case of life-threatening behaviors there sometimes is a need to be more aggressive in the stimulus as one can't afford the behavior to occur again. (For example, running across a busy road.) Positive stimuli should be effusive and have the effect of making the pet noticeably happier. You cannot overdo this. Even when the positive stimuli causes a return of the unwanted behavior it is usually not a bad thing, merely another opportunity for training.



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