

Operant Conditioning

Operant conditioning forms an association between behaviour and a consequence.

There are four possible consequences to any behaviour. They are:

Positive Reinforcement (R+)

Something good can start or be presented, so behaviour increases.

Eg. the dog gets a piece of liver for returning when called.

A primary positive reinforcer is something that the dog does not have to learn to like. Primary R+s usually include food and the chance to engage in instinctive behaviours.

A secondary positive reinforcer is something that the animal has to learn to like, usually through classical conditioning or some other method. Eg. a click, which is also a conditioned positive reinforcer (CR).

Negative Punishment (P-)

Something good can end or be taken away, so behaviour decreases.

Eg. the dog is put on leash and taken from the park for coming to the owner when the owner called.

Some dog owners make the mistake of calling their dogs in the park and then using the negative punishment of taking the dog away from the fun. "Fido, come!" then becomes a conditioned negative punisher (CP-).

Positive Punishment (P+)

Something bad can start or be presented, so behaviour decreases.

Eg. A dog's barking is punished with a startling squirt of citronella.

Many dog trainers actively condition the word "No!" with some punisher, to form an association between the word and the consequence. The conditioned punisher (CP+) is an important part of training with operant conditioning.

Negative Reinforcement (R-)

Something bad can end or be taken away, so behaviour increases.

Eg. The correction collar is loosened when the dog sits. The dog is not corrected when in the heeling position.

Credit for portions of this document to Tan Teck Woon of A Good Dog Training School – Affiliate member of AAPDT. Parts of this document have been excerpted from his essay Training Methods & Maxims as part of his Dog Training Instructor Course with Dog Obedience Guidance Systems of Australia (DOGS).

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