



## HOW TO TRAIN YOUR MAN USING PROFESSIONAL DOG TRAINING PRINCIPLES: A KEY TO GOOD BEHAVIOR

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Managing a man has as much to do with using basic behavioral principles as it has to do with understanding men. Many girlfriends and even wives understand their men but do not always understand the behavioral principles that motivate them. Rather than relying on methods that produce negative outcomes, behavioral psychologists use tools that are based on positive motivational principles. There are several basic operant principles that have been proven to be effective in motivating behavior.

**Understand reinforcers.** A *reinforcer* is something that follows a behavior and increases the probability of that behavior occurring in the future. Although sometimes called *rewards*, the most powerful reinforcers are often intangibles, such as attention, praise, or even a smile or eye contact. Attention is such a powerful reinforcer in some men that it can inadvertently reinforce negative behavior. If a man receives too much attention (negative or otherwise) for undesirable behavior, the undesirable behavior will increase because it is being reinforced. Therefore, it is important to use positive attention focused on the desired behaviors.

**Focus on reinforcing objectives.** *Goals* are usually considered in terms of the end product that is desired. SMART goals are Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, and Time bound. *Objectives* are the smaller steps that lead to goals. Goals are strategic and objectives are tactical. Goals are reached by focusing on objectives. Reinforce steps rather than goals. Reward progress rather than perfection.

**Think about shaping behavior.** Behavioral psychologists use the term *shaping* to refer to reinforcement of successive approximations of the desired behavior until it is reached. Behaviorists shape behavior by reinforcing approximations of the desired behavior rather than waiting for the desired behavior and then rewarding it.

**Divide and conquer.** Whether in training animals, students, or managers, the starting point involves taking the *target behavior* and *operationalizing* the behavior, which means breaking it down into its component parts. A target behavior is a desired goal that is reached by accomplishing the specific objectives that lead to it.

**Ask for small increments of behavior.** Rather than requesting too much at first, remember to divide the overall task into smaller, manageable components. For example, if a man's cave is a mess, start by asking for a smaller, specific objective (e.g., picking up his own underwear from the floor or returning the toilet seat down, or up, or whatever is preferred).

**Ask for active, not passive, behavior.** Ask for positive rather than negative actions. In other words, request the presence of a specific desired behavior rather than the absence of an undesired behavior. Say "Do this" rather than "Don't do that" when you describe what you want done. For example, say "Please smoke your cigar outside" rather than "Don't smoke inside." Say, "Please \_\_\_\_\_" rather than "Don't \_\_\_\_\_."

**Catch your man doing right.** Sometimes, purely by random occurrence, a man might engage in a desirable behavior. Behaviorists call this occurrence a *free operant*. Reward the behavior! Notice it! Praise it! Positive reinforcement of free operants increases the probability that they will occur in the future. In other words, don't catch your man doing wrong; catch your man doing right.

**Use immediate rewards.** As soon as possible after your man accomplishes a specific task, praise him for it. Particularly with a man whose prefrontal cortex has not fully myelinated (e.g., up to age 25), deliver praise immediately and without delay. Professional animal trainers click and treat target behaviors within less than a second of their occurrence. Otherwise, that particular opportunity will be lost forever.

**Reward often at first and less often in the future.** At first, reinforce every action—no matter how small—that is in the desired direction. This strategy will help maintain the new behavior as you reward progressively less often in the future. As the behavior becomes more firmly established, reward less frequently. Psychologists refer to this principle as *stretching the reinforcement interval*, which results in the behavior eventually being more permanent and more resistant to extinction. However, the biggest mistake often involves stretching the reinforcement interval too soon or too long.

**Reinforce motivation.** Even if a target behavior is not reached, but the effort to reach it is there, reward the effort. Rewarding effort is one of the best ways to build a man's motivation. Motivation to do most things is not internal until it is internalized, and most internal motivation is established because it was initially rewarded externally (i.e., through reinforcement).

**Reward specifically.** Don't reward general obedience. Pinpoint your goals and reward specific tasks that are completed. For example, if your man is productive all day, don't reward him by saying "You were great today." Instead, say "You were great in the way you grilled those veggie burgers this afternoon."

**Ask for work before play.** Apply the *Premack principle*, also known as "Grandma's rule." Psychologists working with primates have demonstrated that high frequency behaviors (e.g., play) can be used as natural reinforcers of low frequency behaviors (e.g., work)—if the high frequency behaviors are made contingent on the low frequency behaviors. In other words, encourage him to plan his least rewarding tasks first and his most rewarding tasks last. Rather than letting him fire up that brand new Hoyo de Monterrey cigar in the early afternoon, consider surprising him with a whole box after he cleans the gutters, mows the lawn, and repairs that loose board in your wine cellar. Work first and then play. Yes, saving the sex for the end of the day is known as *contingent reinforcement*.

**Reward high-quality performance.** Keep your standards realistically high and achievable for the task you want your man to accomplish. Let him know exactly what you want done. For example, if he meets a deadline on which you've both agreed, but on which he has made a number of errors, decide in advance which goal is more important (e.g., accuracy or compliance with a deadline) and reward appropriately. Gently bring the errors to his attention and encourage him to redo the work. However, reinforce effort and reward him for the portion of his work that is acceptable.

**Keep your agreement clear and simple.** Be specific in describing the behavior you expect. For example, don't say "Help me pick up, and I'll help you clean, and then we'll play," Instead, say "Pick up the empty shotgun shells, clean up the campsite, and pay the damage deposit, and I'll be waiting in the back of the sheriff's car."

**Remember rather than forget.** Eclectic behaviorists often use the findings of neurolinguistic programmers. Hypnotherapists have long known that a person can only form a mental image of something being done rather than something not being done. Therefore, they state their directives and embedded commands in terms of doing a thing rather than not doing a thing. Similarly, dog trainers use positive rather than negative cues, such as “Hunter, sit” rather than “Hunter stop chasing those coyote.” For primates—which include men—request a specific behavior rather than the absence of it. It is better to say “Please remember to get gas and change the oil in my car” rather than “Don’t forget to get the gas and change the oil.”

**Be consistent in your interactions.** Once you and your man agree on a plan, stick to it. Don’t stop your plan unless there is a very special reason to do so. For example, if he agrees to wash and detail your car and his motorcycle, don’t stop him after he has washed only his motorcycle simply because you’re feeling guilty about his working so hard that day. In fact, have him wash your car before his bike.

**Always be fair and honest.** Never use gimmicks or manipulation. Your man should feel that the reinforcement you offer is worth his efforts. Never withhold a reward if it is earned. If you have a headache, take a pill.

**Transfer the initiative as soon as you can.** As soon as it is practical, shift the responsibility for the new behavior over to your man. Ultimately, what you’re after is your man’s own self-management. When this is done, life will be easier for you. Your man will grow in his ability to visit your mother, clean your hair out of the shower drain, and continually perform a system configuration every time you mess up your computer network at home.

**Understanding punishment.** By definition, a *punishment* is a consequence that has the effect of decreasing the target behavior that it follows. Why, then, are some women so quick to use

punishment? The reason is mainly because it is reinforcing to the punisher. Punishment stops the behavior, at least at that moment and at least in the presence of the punisher. However, although punishment may decrease undesirable behavior in the presence of the punisher, it does not actually build new behaviors. We often use only the tools that we know how to use, rather than learning to use the tools that are best for the job. Think like a man: Rather than using the same old tool for new jobs, get some new tools for the job.

**Beware of using punishment.** Behavioral psychologists have demonstrated that punishment can decrease target behaviors if the punishment is applied immediately, severely, and consistently. Again, punishment does not build or increase new behaviors. Even worse, punishment can also inhibit or reduce behavior in general particularly in the presence of the punisher. It is never an effective means of establishing new behavior. Rather than punishing what is wrong, catch the man doing right and then reinforce the behavior.

**Remember that time out is punishment.** When studying rats and pigeons, operant theorists often observe what happens when the animal is placed in a space where there is *time out* from reinforcement. Women are sometimes too quick to use time out as a punishment, which is unfortunate for the man because punishments do not actually build behavioral skills. Punishment may decrease problem behavior but it does not build behavior. As dog trainers know, some dogs will stray if there is too much time out from positive reinforcement.

**Be aware of the extinction burst.** Although extinction (i.e., not reinforcing a behavior that is not otherwise intrinsically reinforcing) works, it does take time. When reinforcement is suddenly discontinued, men often show an *extinction burst* (i.e., an increase in the problematic behavior such as tantrums. It may take time, but do not inadvertently reinforce behavior when it has been placed on extinction.

**Take time and get results.** Most women overestimate how much their men can accomplish in a short amount of time, but they grossly underestimate how much their men can accomplish over a longer period of time. Think long term and do not expect changes overnight.

**Stimulate his prey drive.** As dog trainers know, some dogs are genetically bred to have a strong prey drive. As with some men, they seem to love chasing game as much as—or more than—they love catching it. If you find yourself doing most of the chasing, consider letting go a bit. Rather than playing the chasing game, slow down, hang back a bit, and give him a chance to pursue you. With some dogs, getting their attention and then running in the other direction can really stimulate their prey drive. Other dogs may lose interest quickly, but these are not the ones you really want to keep.

**Use these principles to motivate yourself.** Last but not least, use these motivation principles to manage your own behavior. Divide large tasks into their smaller components. Focus on active rather than passive behavior by using a “to do” list rather than a “don’t do” list. To increase work productivity, perform work before play. To increase play, then play before work.



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**Disclaimer:** This article was written at the request of some of my dog training friends who like to have fun. ☺

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