RESOURCES

🎾 Creating Positive Triggers

Triggers can be a powerful way to communicate with your dog.

🎾 Why This Matters

Letting your dog know what type of reinforcement they are going to receive is a beautiful way to connect, have joy, create excitement, drive or calmness.

Furthermore, it can be a great tool to transfer value.

🎾 What are Positive Triggers

An example of a positive trigger with my own dog is the phrase “Do you want to go on an Adventure?” in an upbeat voice. This will make her jump and run over to me, ready to head out the door!

🎾 Building You into the Reinforcement

The general reinforcement process looks like this:

- The human ask dog for a “sit” and reaches for their treat pouch before or during the dog’s bottom hitting the ground.
- The human calls their dog, when the dog comes, the cookie or tug toy is presented immediately. Many times, before the dog has actually arrived.

While immediate reinforcement is great to build understanding of a behaviour, it is often carried through the dog’s entire life. I can only recommend moving beyond this stage, once you see your dog understood the task. After the initial stage, we should extend the time the reinforcement appears and build in positive triggers as a secondary reinforcement.

1. Positive Triggers

Take a moment to think about the positive triggers your dog might already have. The most common one, especially around dog sport people, is “ready”. Many people use this just before sending their dog into a search, before a restrained recall or other games.

However, there are many more to be had!

- **Breathing**
  - drawing your breath in sharply and blowing it out could create drive and excitement
  - conversely, breathing deeply and calmly will promote relaxation

- **Phrases**

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- to create excitement, one could use a lower, almost growling voice and draw out the word “r-e-a-d-y”!
- conversely, using a soothing, calm voice “goooood” creates calm and focus

- **Audible**
  - Whisper so your dog must listen carefully – condition this for more drive

- **Expressions**
  - astonishment can trigger excitement

- **Posture**
  - a crouched position is fun and challenging, triggering something exciting is going to happen

- **Motion**
  - Sneaking away triggers focus
  - Dashing away triggers drive

- **Conditioned Reinforcers**
  - expressed in short, shrill tones you can create excitement, drive e.g. “wonderful!”

- **Actions**
  - Open arms could trigger jumping at you, excitement and reinforcement

- **Touch**
  - affectionate smacks during tug can trigger more engagement
  - slow and gentle strokes encourage calm

- **Other objects**
  - putting on your running shoes
  - grabbing your treat pouch

2. Inadvertent triggers

Dogs are very clever in reading our body language and knowing what’s going to happen, way before we come to action. Have you experienced this? You were just reading a book, as you are standing up to get ready, your dog is already sitting at the door, waiting for you.

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Assignment #1 – Identifying triggers

Take a moment to identify all these inadvertent triggers, that you have already created. Do they hinder your training?

Create your own list.

Trigger	Response
Picking up keys	Excited pacing, running to and from the door
Taking your backpack	Calmly lying in bed, knowing it's alone time

3. Type of dog

Before creating new triggers, it is also important what type of triggers your type of dog needs.

- **Over the top dogs**

Surely, we don't want to create more excitement – go back to "Managing Arousal" to see that overarousal can only lead to frustration in both parties.

Is this your dog, look for calming triggers that bring arousal down to a state of learning

- **Dogs needing more drive**

Are you feeding into your reserved dog, patting them with long strokes to reassure them? What these dogs need is more excitement to change their physiology. The easiest way to do this is to run around with them, be goofy and create triggers that will increase their arousal level, looking forward to the fun to have.

4. Poisoned or Stressful triggers

These triggers could also fall into the category of "inadvertent triggers". Accidently, you might have poisoned a trigger by using it in the wrong moment. Let's say you're using "Good girl" as a trigger. Ask yourself if you're only using this secondary reinforcer when your dog has really been a good girl. Or has it come out as well, when you wanted to cheerlead your dog on to bring that fetch toy back?

Do you see how this could poison a trigger not being affective for what you want it to be?

Stressful triggers are triggers that have been used when your dog is finding the action or reward following not reinforcing or trying to jazz the dog up before an action they don't want to do.

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Create and use triggers to keep your dog engaged with you.
Pick one of your new triggers, created in

Assignment #2 – Create new triggers

Create 5 new positive triggers over the next week.

- go to your dog's reinforcement list, using 10 ranked foods, toys, activities you know your dog will get excited about
- If your using food or toys, take 5 of them and hide them around your house.
    - when playing with your new trigger, take one of them and hide it on you for the first time you present it (after that your dog will know it's on you)
    - if the toy is too big to hide, stay close to it for easy reach
- Create your new trigger, like the list above (Positive Triggers) e.g. breath, touch, posture.
    - try not to exaggerate your trigger – present it in the way you will use it. Make sure you're quick and swift presenting reinforcement
- If you are using an activity
    - use your trigger, immediately cue your dog to the activity e.g. go swim and run to it.

Trigger presented	Reinforcement used
Posture: crouching down	Tug toy
Touch: light hand on chest	Soft face, walk away for confident stay

Effective ways of presenting a new trigger

Your mechanics to create positive and meaningful triggers plays a role in your success. Here are two effective ways.

- Delay the reinforcer after presenting the trigger.
    - Present your trigger
    - Pause
    - Whip out your reinforcement with joy
- Repeat the cue while your dog is doing something they LOVE
    - during an intense game of tug, repeat your trigger to condition the fun and drive.

Once you have created these triggers, you can use them prior to when you want your dog to be excited or calm.

Be mindful of not using the trigger when your dog has left work to coax them back – this is the quickest way of poisoning the trigger.

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