

Learning through conditioning – begging dog



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Learning Through Conditioning: How to Stop Begging Dog Behavior You sit down for hot delicious dinner. Your mouth salivates as you cut into your thick, juicy steak. As you're about to eat your first bite you hear a small, innocent whimpering sound. You look down. There, at your feet, is a little dog looking up at you with puppy eyes, just begging for scrap... or two... or three.... You give in and drop your little companion a treat, only to have the begging continue again. Does this scenario sound familiar?

If you're like millions of other dog owners out there you've probably experienced a similar situation. My dog, Rocky, is a persistent beggar. He'll sit and stare at first, watching me with his big pug eyes while I eat, quietly "begging" at my feet. If that doesn't work he'll start whimpering, quietly at first, then louder. If that behavior doesn't get him some food, he'll step it up a notch and start pawing at my legs. On a few occasions he has even began jumping and barking, changing from a begging behavior to outright demanding!

If I give in, and drop a scrap or two for the little guy, he'll just start the cycle all over again. This gets annoying in a hurry, and leads me to yelling at the dog, telling him to "Go away and stop begging!" Despite all my shouts and pleas, he doesn't listen. He continues on with his begging behavior. But what causes this unpleasant behavior? And who is really at fault here, Rocky or me, the dog or his "master." After learning about B. F. Skinner's theory of operant conditioning, I quickly realized that I am at fault for my own dog's behavior.

According to Skinner, “ behavior which is reinforced tends to be repeated (i. e. strengthened); behavior which is not reinforced tends to die out-or be extinguished (i. e. weakened),” (Mcleod, 2007, p6). Each time I gave my pug a scrap from the table, or let him lick a plate clean, I was reinforcing his begging behavior. Without realizing it, I was essentially telling him, “ If you keep begging, I’m going to keep giving in and let you have food from the table. ” In a way, the dog had become my master. After this discovery, I decided it was time for a change. I needed to find way to stop my dog from begging. According to the theory of operant conditioning, the best way to extinguish unwanted behavior is through a combination of punishment and reinforcement. Punishment reduces unwanted behavior, while reinforcement increases desired behavior (Meyers, 2010). So, I designed a plan to stop Rocky’s unwanted behavior (begging at the table) and replace it with a more desirable behavior (lying in his bed while we eat dinner). In order to bring about extinction of my dog’s unwanted behavior, I had to do two things: punish the behavior and stop reinforcing it.

Because this behavior was my fault in the first place, the only punishment that seemed fitting was telling Rocky “ NO! ” in a strong, firm voice. To avoid confusing him, I decided I would only do this if he demonstrated a clear begging action, such as pawing my leg or whimpering. To stop reinforcing the bad behavior, I would stop giving-in to his begging. This meant no scraps from the table, no licking the plate clean, and no treats while I eat. Since sitting at my feet, staring up at me was a form of begging as well, I stopped acknowledging his presence during dinnertime as well.

And because getting a scrap from anyone in the household would continue to reinforce the negative behavior, I made sure to get my entire family on board. No scraps for Rocky no matter how much he begged. No exceptions. This plan was much easier said than done. The children continued to sneak bits of food to their furry friend, my wife had a hard time ignoring his “ puppy eyes” while we ate, and I kept forgetting my own rules. Out of habit, I would put my plate down for the dog to lick clean, only to regret it a second later when I realized what I had just done.

Over time, we got better at following our plan. The gap between “ slip-ups” became longer and longer. However, each time someone forgot and gave Rocky a treat, he became more determined than ever! This type of partial reinforcement strengthened Rocky’s resolve, and the begging continued. I concluded that my plan needed a third step: replace the unwanted behavior with a more desirable one. To combat Rocky’s unwanted behavior, and prevent anyone in my family from accidentally reinforcing his begging, I began to condition our dog with a new behavior.

Every time we were about to sit down and eat, I would call Rocky to his bed in the living room. I would immediately give him a treat (positive reinforcement) and then tell him to stay. I would return after only one minute. If he was still in his bed, I would reward him with another treat. Then I would wait two minutes and repeat. I continued with fixed-interval schedule until we were able to enjoy an entire meal without going back to check on our dog. After a successful meal-time, I would reinforce Rocky’s great behavior with an extra-special dinner... in his own bowl!

My family and I are now very proud of our little black pug, and ourselves. After we recognized that our own behavior was the root of the problem, we made a plan and put it into action. We stopped reinforcing the bad behavior, used mild punishment when necessary, and began conditioning our dog towards more desirable behaviors through the use of positive reinforcements. Now every member of our family, including our dog Rocky, is much happier!

References

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