

How to train your pet

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Have you ever wondered how the animals you see on TV and in movies are trained to perform such amazing tricks? Many of their trainers use a technique based on the teaching methods developed by behavioral psychologists such as BF Skinner. Skinner studied techniques for reinforcing desired behavior in animals. Animals can be taught many sophisticated tricks using Skinner's technique. If you want your pet to do a trick, you must understand the technique psychologists call "shaping." Shaping means reinforcing, or strengthening behaviors that you want to encourage.

Begin by making some decisions. First of all, you need to choose your subject. You can pick any household pet, such as a cat, a dog, a hamster, or a bird. Suppose, for example, that you want to teach your dog a trick. The next thing to do is to choose a reward. Food is usually the easiest reward to use. Keep in mind that in order for food to be an effective reward, your dog has to be hungry. Don't try to teach him a new trick right after he has eaten a big meal. Also, a reward is most effective when it is given at the same time that the dog performs the desired trick. Since you will not be always able to give the dog food as quickly as you would like to, you will need to develop a "conditional reinforcer." You can do this by connecting the food to something else, such as a ringing bell. In this case, the sound of the bell makes is the conditioned reinforcer.

You are now ready to begin conditioning the dog to respond to the bell. Get out about 40 small dog biscuits. Toss a few of them to your dog, one at a time, at a rate of about one or two biscuits per minute. As soon as the dog starts eating the biscuits, ring the bell and then throw him another biscuit. Wait about 30 seconds and then repeat the steps. When you ring the bell, do

not make any other sounds or movements. Give the food only when the dog is standing in the place where he got the food. When your dog reaches the point where he goes to the food place whenever you ring the bell, you are ready to begin teaching him the trick.

At this point, you need to choose the trick you want to teach. An easy trick is teaching your dog to roll over. Shape the dog's behavior by reinforcing anything that resembles the behavior you are trying to teach. Begin by reinforcing any attempt to lie down. Then reinforce any movement of his body when he is lying down. Every time you reinforce any of his behaviors that resembles rolling over, immediately give him a biscuit and ring the bell. In this way, he will begin to associate the sound of the bell with the trick. Continue reinforcing closer approximations of rolling over with the biscuits and the bell. During the teaching session, do not touch the dog, talk to him, or in any way distract him. A normal dog, according to Skinner, will learn the trick within 5 minutes.

As you can see, it is really not difficult to train your pet to do a trick. It is only a matter of little time and some effort. Once you have established a conditioned reinforce, you can easily teach your dog a new trick by shaping his behavior. However, if you want to teach your dog another trick, you must eliminate the first behavior by no longer reinforcing it. Eventually, he will stop rolling over and will be ready to learn something new.