

Differential Reinforcement

Let's recap some important vocabulary words.

Reinforcement is a consequence that occurs following a behavior that is likely to cause that behavior to occur again. For example, Fido sits, and you give him a piece of hot dog. You have successfully reinforced the behavior, or the "sit."

Extinction occurs when one simply ignores an unwanted behavior, and the behavior eventually disappears because it is not reinforced. For example, Spot jumps on you when you return home. Instead of saying, "NO," you ignore him and walk away. Even talking to your dog when he is performing an unwanted behavior is a type of reinforcement, so be aware of when you speak to your dog!

****This is not an appropriate tool for all behaviors, however.**



Differential Reinforcement blends both reinforcement and extinction into a tool that will help you teach your dog which behaviors you deem appropriate.

Instead of ignoring your dog and letting 'extinction' occur by itself, you can replace the inappropriate behavior with a more acceptable one. Here's how it works:

Step 1: Identify the behavior you want to replace. When your dog engages in the behavior, start allowing it to go extinct by giving him ZERO reinforcement.

Step 2: Decide on a desirable behavior you will teach to replace the unwanted behavior.

Step 3: Reinforce the new behavior while ignoring the unwanted behavior.

There are variations of differential reinforcement. One form is DRI, or differential reinforcement of incompatible behaviors. For example, Princess barks at the fence. If you ask her to do a "sit-stay" next to you when she is barking, you are performing DRI, because Princess can't possibly bark at the fence and sit next to you at the same time! The unacceptable behavior (barking at the fence) and reinforced behavior (sitting next to you) are incompatible. Don't forget to ignore the barking while you are reinforcing the replacement behavior!

Using differential reinforcement and DRI with your pooch will allow you to say, "good dog" instead a constant barrage of "no, no no." Training is not only about obedience, but it is also a way to build trust and confidence in your dog. He will begin to see you as a leader that he can count on to guide him in the appropriate direction.

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