Learning Principles and Methods

Understanding scientific learning principles and methods is the first step toward developing your teaching skills for training dogs and their owners.[2] While it's easy to become overwhelmed with learning theory terminology, you actually use many learning principles and methods in your everyday life when interacting with dogs—and people.

Having a firm understanding of learning principles and methods will help you to modify existing or teach new behaviors to any animal.[3] Using only proven, science-based methods is essential to reach desired training goals; do not rely on anecdotal evidence. By following proven learning methods, you will be setting up your clients and their dogs for success. In addition, staying abreast of new scientific research will ensure you are aware of the latest training information.

There are several learning methods or processes involved in training dogs, including operant conditioning, classical conditioning and counter-conditioning. Within these methods, the essential elements of training a dog include motivation, reinforcement and punishment. To employ these effectively, you must know how to set up the environment for success, use conditioned reinforcers and train to fluency.

Least Intrusive, Minimally Aversive Approach

hakase420/Adobe Stock

Animal Behavior College's philosophy is that creating a canine-human relationship built on positive interaction and consistency can: often deter future unwanted behavior problems; facilitate faster learning; and even solve existing behavioral challenges. This philosophy incorporates scientific behavioral principles of operant conditioning and the LIMA approach: using the Least Intrusive, Minimally Aversive method possible in every training case.[4] While our bias is toward positive reinforcement, we believe instruction on a variety of animal training methods and ideologies provides the most comprehensive education.

2 Blake, M. (2008). The dog trainers resource 2: The APDT chronicle of the dog collection. Wenatchee, WA: Dogwise Pub.

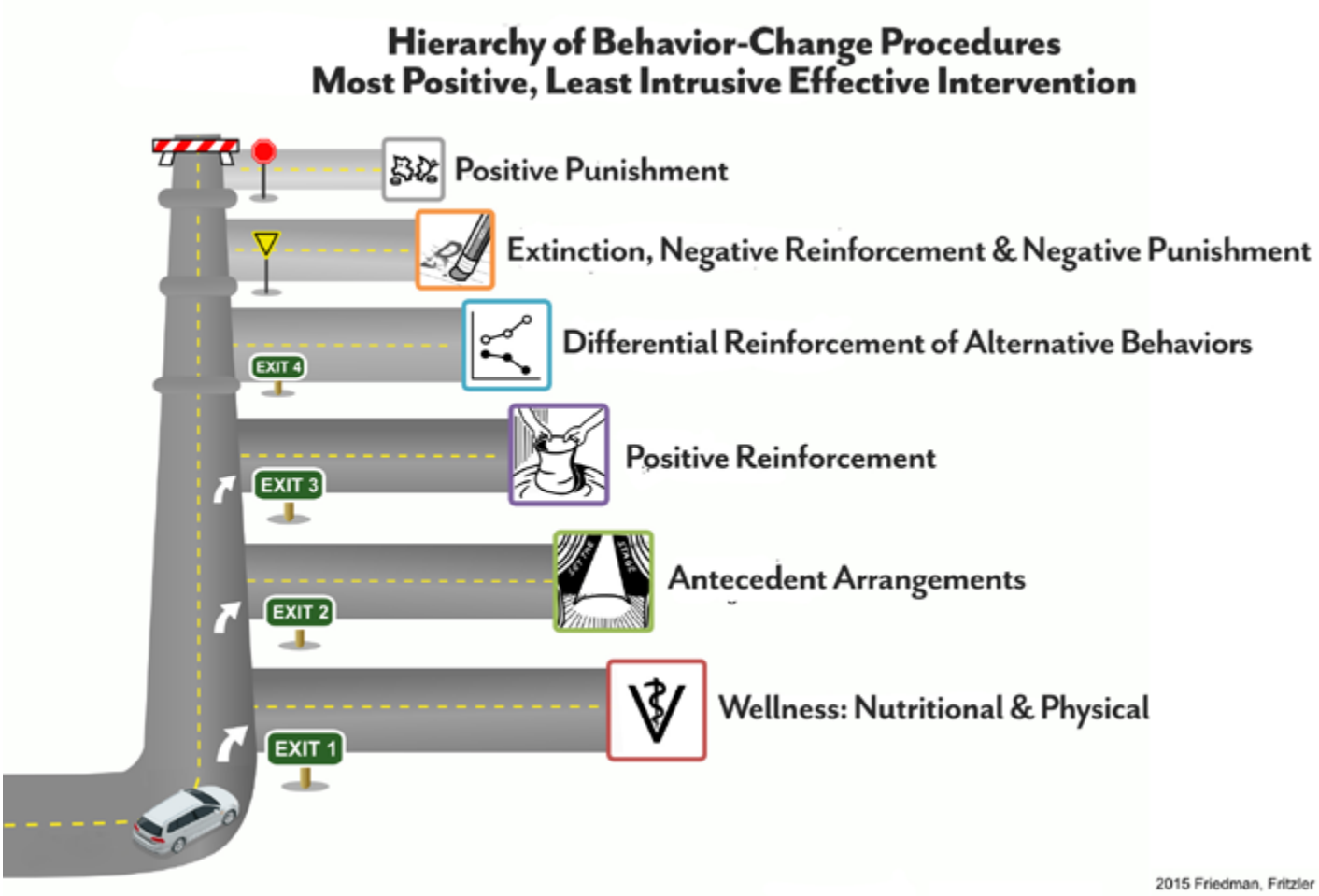
3 Pryor, K. (2010). Reaching the animal mind: Clicker training and what it teaches us about all animals. New York, NY: Scribner.

4 Association of Professional Dog Trainers. (n.d.). APDT Position statement on LIMA. Retrieved June 13, 2018, from https://apdt.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/position-statement-lima.pdf

Humane Hierarchy

Susan Friedman, PhD, a well-respected behavior analyst, first coined the term "humane hierarchy" as well as the model for behavioral intervention and training of dogs. Its theory states that a dog is motivated to learn only after his base needs are fulfilled and the proper correction has been applied. The corrections are applied in levels (or steps) so that the least intrusive is used first and become more advanced as a dog moves up the "ladder."[5]

Just as you cannot focus on a task without your basic needs being met, neither can a dog be expected to perform at his peak if he is hungry or cold or thirsty or distracted by another animal.[6] Friedman's behavior change hierarchy posits that once a dog's wellness is ensured—he has proper nutrition and his physicals needs are meet—behavior modification can begin.[7]



5 Friedman, S. (2010). What's Wrong With This Picture? Effectiveness Is Not Enough. APDT Journal, (March/April). doi: http://www.behaviorworks.org/files/articles/APDT%20What%27s%20Wrong%20with%20this%20Picture%20-%20Dogs.pdf

6 Friedman, S. (2010). What's Wrong With This Picture? Effectiveness Is Not Enough. APDT Journal, (March/April). doi: http://www.behaviorworks.org/files/articles/APDT%20What%27s%20Wrong%20with%20this%20Picture%20-%20Dogs.pdf

7 McNeil, I. (2014, November 12). The Humane Hierarchy of Dog Training Explained. Retrieved December 21, 2017, from http://www.themoderndogtrainer.net/humane-hierarchy-behavior-modification-explained/

The graphic on the previous page illustrates the six levels of modification methods, beginning with Antecedent Arrangement (i.e., changing the environment) and ending with Positive Punishment, which is strongly advised against. Each level must be thoroughly explored before moving on to the next, more intrusive one.[8]

A dog's wellness requirements will need to be met (e.g., food, water, physical care, etc.) before you can begin successfully training or modifying his behavior.
chalabala/Adobe Stock

Successfully modifying a dog's behavior in the least intrusive and minimally aversive (LIMA) way will help ensure dogs' emotional and mental equilibrium is maintained. This, in turn, helps ensure that owners will have a satisfying and respectful relationship with their dogs.[9] You should always use the Humane Hierarchy of Behavior Change Procedures as your guide when teaching a new behavior, generalizing a known behavior or tackling an undesirable behavior.

8 McNeil, I. (2014, November 12). The Humane Hierarchy of Dog Training Explained. Retrieved December 21, 2017, from http://www.themoderndogtrainer.net/humane-hierarchy-behavior-modification-explained/

9 Lindsay, S. R. (2005). Handbook of applied dog behavior and training: procedures and protocols (Vol. Three). Ames, IA: Blackwell.

The ABC Model

Understanding the underlying process for changing a dog's behavior is as simple as knowing your ABCs: Antecedent, Behavior and Consequences.

- **Antecedent:** what is going on right before a behavior (a cue, trigger, etc.); setting events (environment); and/or providing motivation (e.g., using a food lure or making a "smoochy" sound).[10]
- **Behavior:** the observable outcome, such as a sit.[11]
- **Consequences:** what happens after the behavior; giving or withholding a reward.[12]

anna_zasimova/Adobe Stock

Setting up a dog for success is called antecedent arrangement.[13] This means a trainer (or owner) manipulates the environment to ensure a dog is successful when learning a new behavior. For example, if a dog has a difficult time learning how to "Down" on a hard, slick surface, a trainer can easily manipulate the environment by adding a soft non-skid rug to prevent slipping. Another example: A dog is just learning how to walk politely on a leash. The trainer (or owner) practices the new behavior in a distraction-free area, such as a hallway inside the home.

When preparing to teach a dog a new behavior—such as politely waiting by the door for a walk—you need to ensure you use good motivators and that there are no distractions.
Javier brosch/Adobe Stock

When trying to influence behavior, people generally focus too much on consequences: did the dog sit or not. This is especially true when working to decrease or eliminate negative behaviors, such as barking, jumping, etc. You should carefully arrange antecedents to ensure a dog can easily perform the appropriate behavior. This makes selecting consequences easy; when all the behaviors are acceptable, all the consequences will be positive.[14]

10 Nugent, Pam M.S. (2018, April 13). Antecedent. Retrieved June 13, 2018, from https://psychologydictionary.org/antecedent/

11 Gilmore, H., MSW, LLMSW, BCBA. (2017, July 04). ABC's of Behavior (Antecedent-Behavior-Consequence) | Reflections from a Children's Therapist. Retrieved June 13, 2018, from https://pro.psychcentral.com/child-therapist/2017/07/abcs-of-behavior-antecedent-behavior-consequence/

12 Pratt, C., PhD, & Dubie, M., M.Ed. (n.d.). Observing Behavior Using A-B-C Data. Retrieved June 13, 2018, from https://www.iidc.indiana.edu/pages/Observing-Behavior-Using-A-B-C-Data

13 Friedman, S. (2009, January). Dogs Too! Functional Assessment: Hypothesizing Predictors And Purposes Of Problem Behavior To Improve Behavior-Change Plans. Retrieved June 12, 2018, from http://www.behaviorworks.org/htm/for_dogs_too.html

14 Friedman, S. (2009, January). Dogs Too! Functional Assessment: Hypothesizing Predictors And Purposes Of Problem Behavior To Improve Behavior-Change Plans. Retrieved June 12, 2018, from http://www.behaviorworks.org/htm/for_dogs_too.html

In addition, antecedent arrangement is the preferred first choice—after assuring a dog's wellness—when you follow Humane Hierarchy procedures and use the LIMA approach.[15]

ABC Example: Dog Jumps on Visitors

- **Antecedent:** Ask a friend to stand still about 6 feet away while you hold the dog's leash.
- **Behavior:** The dog sits or keeps all four feet on the ground.
- **Consequence:** You or your friend gives/tosses the dog bits of hot dogs as a reward.

Once the dog learns to keep all four feet on the ground or sit, it's time to change the antecedent arrangement so that the visitor is standing closer or the dog is unleashed.

Image left: *In order to earn a reward (consequence), the dog must keep all of his feet on the ground (behavior) when someone is standing close by (antecedent).*
Image right: *If he is unable to keep all four feet on the ground (behavior), he will not earn a reward (consequence), and you will need to change the antecedent by having your friend stand farther away.*
Jesse Hernandez/Animal Behavior College Inc.

15 Friedman, S. (2009, January). Dogs Too! Functional Assessment: Hypothesizing Predictors And Purposes Of Problem Behavior To Improve Behavior-Change Plans. Retrieved June 12, 2018, from http://www.behaviorworks.org/htm/for_dogs_too.html