

The laws of learning

Good news: There is a key element of training your dog already knows! He was born knowing the laws of learning. These laws are the keys to unlocking a successful training relationship with your dog. When you know them and use them, you have the ability to train almost any behavior you can think of!

Law No. 1:

Behavior that is rewarded is most likely to be repeated.

More simply stated: Dogs do what works. If pawing at the door gets you to open it, if barking at you gets him the treat, or if pulling you down the sidewalk gets him where he wants to go, he's likely to keep repeating these behaviors. Happily, we can use this law to our advantage by showing him that a sit gets us to open the door, or lying quietly at our feet earns him a tasty tidbit.

Law No 2:

Behavior that is not rewarded is most likely to disappear.

If you go out to your car one day, get in and turn the key and the car starts, your behavior is reinforced – it is likely you'll turn the key the next time. If the next time you turn the key, the car doesn't start, you'll probably try again – and again. Eventually, however, if the car still doesn't start, you will stop turning the key altogether. You may try something else (such as having the car towed to a mechanic or looking under the hood), but the key-turning behavior has stopped.

Law No. 3:

Once behavior is established, a variable schedule of reinforcement can make the behavior stronger.

This is also known as the “gambling” or “slot-machine” principle. Let's say your dog likes to steal food off the counter, and you are training him using law of learning No. 2 by making sure there is NEVER food on the counter for him to steal. He is getting to the point where he only makes a casual glance toward the counter once in awhile.

Then, one day, another member of the household forgets and leaves a delicious plate of cookies within the dog's reach. He jumps up and eats them – and now his counter-surfing behavior will be stronger than ever! Why? The same reason people keep pumping quarters into slot machines – that behavior may pay off big-time!