

TRAINING A DALMATIAN



For a long time dog training was literally in the dark ages. Trainers used choke collars and sharp corrections. The dogs were not happy. Dalmatians were very unhappy because they wanted to learn and obey but they are sensitive, spirited dogs and they did not want to be trained harshly. Unfortunately since Dalmatians did not do well with pain avoidance training, they were thought to be stubborn and not intelligent.

Then came the dawn of a new age of dog training that stressed kindness and positive reinforcement. These new training methods were based on rewarding correct behavior with toys, treats, and lots of praise. Now only totally out-of-date instructors teach the jerk and pull method. Dalmatians really enjoy this type of training and they are eager to show their true intelligence and working ability. Many Dalmatians have become stars in obedience, agility, therapy, and public education. Their owners were extremely proud and are eager to spread the word about the breed's intelligence.

What is positive reinforcement training? It is rewarding a dog for doing the right thing and ignoring or reshaping undesirable behaviors. For example, if you are trying to teach a dog to sit you can stand there all day and yell "Sit" but if you haven't taught him what the word means it will do no good. With positive reinforcement you will use a toy or treat, called a lure or motivator, and use it to shape the behavior. You move the treat towards the dog's nose and he will sit in order to get it. If he bounces up to get it you say nothing to correct him but you do not give him the treat. When he does sit, he gets praise and the treat. After a few such episodes the dog will sit every time you bring the treat towards his nose. Now you add a word to tell him what he is doing. Say "Sit" just as he sits. Soon he will have the connection between the word and the action. Now he will get a treat after he complies with the verbal command. As the behavior becomes more and more established you start to vary the reward system. Sometimes he gets a treat, sometimes he only gets praise. Sometimes you surprise him with a jackpot, an extra good treat. The dog will stay enthusiastic about working because he never knows when he might get that jackpot.

Clicker training, or operant conditioning, is based on the training used for performing dolphins and whales. It is impractical to put a choke collar on a killer whale and haul him off and give him a sharp correction. Trainers found they could use a device, usually a whistle, to let the animal know when he performed correctly. The sound of the whistle means "You did it right. Come get a treat." For dogs, a clicker (just like the little cricket toys we had as kids...oh come on, you remember!) is used as the signaling device. The dog is first conditioned to the clicker. The handler clicks and then rewards the dog with a food tidbit. This might be done 20 or 30 times so the dog learns the click means a treat is coming. Then a motivator or lure is used to shape a behavior. When the dog does it right he gets a click and then a reward. If he gets it wrong there is no correction but there is also no click and no reward. The clicker can be used to "capture" a behavior. For example, if you don't mind taking a lot of time to train a dog to sit, you could just stand around with the clicker. When the dog sits of his own accord you click and give him a reward. Every time he sits you click and reward. He will soon get the idea. Then you can add the verbal command. Of course, you could stand around waiting for a very long time if you were trying to teach something like the teeter-totter in agility. It might be days or weeks before the dog goes over to the teeter on his own and walks across it. You get much faster results by using a lure as in the example above to shape the behavior and then using the clicker to let the dog know when he gets it right.

Owners who want to use these methods to train a dog should seek out instructors who are well versed in the techniques. Visit the class and see what is going on. If everyone is using a choke collar and jerking the dog around this is not a good class for your Dalmatian. Look for a place where the handlers use treats, toys, buckle collars, and, perhaps, clickers to train. The dogs will be wagging their tails and working eagerly. Positive reinforcement training allows the dog to learn to think on his own. The dog will not be afraid to learn new things. He will experiment to see what behaviors bring rewards.

The ideal time to start training is when you first get your puppy. Sign up for a puppy kindergarten class as soon as possible. The puppy class should be taught with buckle collars not choke collars. It should provide ample opportunity for the puppy to socialize with the other dogs and handlers. But it should also provide instruction on how to teach the puppy to sit, down, come when called, walk on a leash, etc. The puppy will learn attention, that is, to look up at the owner and to try to maintain eye contact with the owner. It is a lot easier to train a dog when he is looking at you. The basics of housebreaking and problem prevention should be covered. Many puppy kindergartens use agility equipment such as ramps and tunnels to teach confidence and coordination.

After puppy kindergarten take a basic obedience class. Again the class should be taught using positive reinforcement. The dogs should be worked on loose leads and the instructor should stress praising and rewarding good behavior rather than correcting undesirable behavior. Attention work will be emphasized. There will be more going on than heeling in a circle. The dog will learn to pay attention to the owner and work in spite of distractions.

If your Dalmatian is already an adult and in need of training, take heart. These methods can work very well for you too. If your dog is badly out of control you may need a few private lessons with the instructor to work on attention and some basic control. Then you can go on to a group class. Some people may advise you to try a prong or pinch collar. DON'T DO IT!!! If you really have a wild, lunging dog, try a Halti, Gentle Leader, or other type of head collar (similar to halters used on horses) instead.

There are a number of benefits to positive reinforcement training. A 15-minute obedience session is excellent exercise, helps burn off some excess energy, increases the bond between dog and owner, and results in a well-trained dog. What a deal! The better trained your dog is, the more time you will want to spend with him. This will make both of you a lot happier.

Once your dog has some of the basics down pat, you might like to try earning a Canine Good Citizen certificate. This 10-part test is offered by many dog clubs and training organizations and is open to any dog over six months of age. When your dog passes you will get a neat certificate that you can frame and hang on the wall above Spot's bed. The Canine Good Citizen Test should be a goal for every dog owner.

Keep up with the obedience training even after you have completed the classes. The old adage that you lose what you don't use is true for dogs too.

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