

Who Cares More?

- By Roger Hild

“This hurts me more than it hurts you.” These were words my father sometimes spoke as I faced some unpleasant consequence that I would have brought upon myself. As I got older, I came to gain a deeper appreciation and understanding of just what he meant. Sometimes it meant having to say “No,” sometimes it meant having to set or enforce a limit and sometimes it meant he had to follow through with a punishment I had earned. I am sure it would have been much easier (and less painful) for him to simply give in, make excuses, blame “extenuating” circumstances or simply turn a blind eye. But he didn’t – he endured the discomfort of follow through and today I am the better for it.

Compare my experience to that of the child who has never been told “No,” who’s every demand is catered to and who has been sheltered from ever having to face the consequences of his/her actions. I get to meet many such individuals daily because when I am not wearing my dog trainer’s hat, I have another profession that frequently requires me to work with the spoiled, over indulged youngsters I have just described. Many times such pampered children grow into young people with very serious emotional and behavioral problems. Recently, Dr. Maggie Mamen wrote about this very thing in her book, “The Pampered Child Syndrome.” (The parallels to the spoiled dog syndrome are striking.)

In working with these troubled youth, it quickly becomes apparent that the parents had wanted much better for their children than the harsh reality they were now facing. They frequently would say that all they wanted for their children was to do well, find a meaningful place in society and lead long and productive lives. At some point in working with these kids, their parents often come to the painful realization that their lack of structure, discipline, and limits were major contributors to the current out-of-control situation. Often while acknowledging the need for limits and discipline, it is not uncommon to hear, “I just can’t say no,” or “I just can’t stand seeing him get so upset.” At this point it strikes me – these parents are not willing to endure the hurt my father spoke about and was willing to endure FOR MY SAKE. They are prepared (whether they realize it or not) to place their feelings – their own comfort level above the real needs of their child.

No doubt you are already seeing some parallels to the way people choose to raise and train their dogs. Some owners are prepared to set and enforce limits while others are not. Some will say “No” while others will not and some will punish where others won’t. Indeed, the comparison would not be complete until one considers the fact that many dog owners view their dog as a fur-child and refer to themselves as their dog’s parent. Spoiled rotten dogs are becoming as common as spoiled rotten kids.

Associative Learning, Memory and Four-Quadrant Learning Theory

For all recorded history and probably even longer, we have known that we learn from the experiences we have. The attitudes we have, the choices we make and our general views

on something (including our thoughts and feelings) are associated to the memories we form, linked to those experiences. We also knew that a great many creatures, including dogs, learned similarly to ourselves. We have known that current behaviour is often linked to things we have learned and our memories of past experiences. It really didn't matter if one was "adding or subtracting reinforcers/punishers," we all realized it was how the event itself was experienced and interpreted that mattered most. This stuff was neither rocket science nor was it new.

One example of learning from experience could be something as simple as operating a light switch. Imagine someone from some remote country did not know how to increase the light in a room. You help them operate the light switch and the light comes on. The act of operating the switch becomes associated with the light and this information gets stored as a memory. This memory is essential when, in the future, more or less light is desired.

In addition to simple information, experiences can be associated with some degree of pleasure or pain. Top motivational speakers focus on this search for pleasure and avoidance of pain as prime factors in determining what actions an individual will take. It is how the event itself is experienced (or what one anticipates) that is important and it matters little if it was +P, -P, +R or -R. In fact, instead of the four-quadrant model, a much better understanding can be gained by simply looking at the "pros and cons" of the situation.

It is my opinion that the move toward Skinner's operant conditioning theory caused a subtle but significant shift in views about learning and ultimately this spawned the current pp movement. With its emphasis on adding and subtracting reinforcers and punishers, operant conditioning theory shifted the focus from the experience of the subject to actions of the teacher and the tools being used. Subsequently, disciples from this school sort of morphed into focusing on adding or removing rewards as all that is necessary to reliably manipulate behaviour and they discouraged the use of aversives, often with the claim they are not necessary.

When this "science" hit the dog-training scene it was promoted as new, fresh, dog friendly, latest scientific facts about learning etc. This was initially greeted with a lot of enthusiasm because the idea of being able to accomplish the same reliable results, in a training program, without aversives has a very seductive quality to it. If it could establish that aversive control is not necessary, then one could begin to argue that the continued use of anything considered aversive, constitutes abuse. What began as the seduction of the pp movement rapidly became the trap.

It is an interesting dynamic that many times "positive" trainers (including those who describe their approach as "positive reinforcement - negative punishment") are only willing to examine the training experience from their end of things. They are unwilling to consider that regardless of whether or not they add an aversive, the subject can experience any action taken (to effect a change) as aversive.

It is an element of human nature to want to shelter, nurture and protect those we care about – sometimes well past the point of usefulness to a point where it can actually be detrimental. It's as if we are sheltering, nurturing and protecting a part of ourselves. It is because we care that we experience pleasure in another's joy and sorrow in another's hurt. When you are the cause of the joy or the hurt (as is the case when you praise or correct) you cannot completely divorce yourself from the process and will also experience, to some degree, the consequence. Who wouldn't want to give (and thus receive) only pleasurable consequences? It is interesting that even when deciding to follow the "positive" route only, some still have difficulty controlling and withholding the reward. They just can't say no. They "care" deeply. In a life sheltered from unpleasant consequences, the question remains, "Who cares more?"