HANDOUT 02: OPERANT CONDITIONING EXPLAINED

While many of us have an understanding of classical conditioning, wherein our **environment** affects our **behavior** (think Pavlov's Dogs), operant conditioning is a training practice wherein the animal's **behavior** affects its **environment.**

Using this practice, we rely on empathy and understanding of our dog to cater the consequences of his actions. While the framework is the same for each dog, the methods of reinforcement we use are individual to the dog and what motivates him.

This kind of conditioning is separated into **positive** and **negative**, which in this context, refers to the **adding** or **removing** of a stimulus.

We use **Reinforcement** when we see a behavior we want to **encourage**:

- Positive Reinforcement introduces a positive stimulus to the dog, whether a treat, toy, or our attention.
- Negative Reinforcement removes an unpleasant stimulus such as leash pressure, or even completely removing the dog from the situation he is in.

In either case, implementation of **Reinforcement** will **encourage** the behavior directly preceding it.

We use **Discipline**, loosely termed as such, when we see a behavior we want to **discourage**.

- Positive Discipline introduces an unpleasant stimulus, such as a verbal correction or leash pressure.
- Negative Discipline removes a pleasant stimulus, such as a treat, toy, or our attention.

In either case, implementation of **Discipline** will **discourage** the behavior directly preceding it.

Not only must we have a clear understanding of how our dogs communicate, but also what they view as pleasant or unpleasant. While one dog may be willing to commit to anything for a treat, his brother may only perform a requested command for his ball. One dog may only need to be scolded verbally to avoid an unwanted behavior in the future, while another, more intense dog may require more clear communication tools such as a Sprenger Prong collar or other (gentle) physical correction. The key is finding balance between adding and removing pleasant or unpleasant experiences as a **response** to our dog's behavior.

Something else of great importance is to understand how dogs think and understand what we communicate to them. Dogs do not **generalize** very well, meaning they associate learned behavior strictly with the environment in which they were taught. A dog that is perfectly behaved in the home may be out of control in the front yard or on a walk, for example. In addition, dogs do not have the capacity as we do to think backwards through a situation. A dog who runs away from home may be punished upon his return, however he will not associate this punishment with running away – he will associate it with returning home, and so will be less likely to do so in the future.

A key part of operant conditioning is making the response as **instant as possible** so that the dog associates the correct behavior with his reinforcement or discipline. The easiest way to do this is with an **auditory marker**, or sound that the dog associates with his preferred reward (treat, toy, etc) and your preferred method of discipline (verbal correction, declining attention, etc). You may have seen dogs trained with a clicker, but we can accomplish this just as easily with a preferred marker word, such as "yes!" for reinforcement, and a sharp "Ah-ah" for discipline, said in the same tone and with the same result each time.Preferred methods of discipline may take time as you learn what your dog responds best to, but a reinforcement marker is the first thing I teach new clients because it's how their dog will know he's doing something right!

While there is always trial-and-error when training our dogs, consistency is key. Dogs learn best with **routine and repetition**, so when you find something that works, stick with it! It can be easy to feel discouraged and to compare your dog's behavior to that of others, and, always remember: your dog depends on **you**, and you are both on this journey **together**. No one else has a dog like yours, so there is no use fearing judgement. Our continuous goal is to increase the quality of life and happiness of both **you** and **your** canine – the results you reap will be more than worth the effort!