

Punishment or Negative Reinforcement?

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Not too long ago we heard a friend describing his frustration with his dog digging in his garden. He said “that dog needs a little negative reinforcement for his digging behavior. I’m going to have to punish that boy!” Our friend was equating negative reinforcement with punishment. It seems that a lot of people believe that these two things are the same. In fact, they are not. It’s important to keep them separate because they refer to different ways of learning.

When you and I think about punishment we think about something that causes discomfort or pain. To psychologists, punishment is a way of learning that occurs when some sort of unpleasant or aversive consequence follows a behavior. That behavior is made less likely to occur in the future as a result of that bad consequence. You have an electronic fence around your yard. Your dog wears a collar that gives him a small electric shock every time he tries to cross the wire buried in the yard. The aversive consequence is the shock, the behavior that is reduced or eliminated is walking or running across the barrier. After several exposures to the shock the dog learns by punishment learning not to run or walk across the barrier. If the shock does not stop his leaving the yard, then punishment learning has not occurred, even if he still receives the unpleasant shocks. In punishment, the dog learns not to leave the yard because bad things happen when he does (he gets shocked).

Negative reinforcement is a different way of learning where a behavior is made more likely to occur because some unpleasant consequence is removed or avoided. Where punishment decreases or eliminates a behavior, negative reinforcement has the opposite effect of increasing behavior. Negative reinforcement often occurs to help an animal escape or avoid some unpleasant consequence. The dog with the electronic fence not only learns to not cross the barrier, he also learns that if he turns and runs parallel to the fence or away from the fence, he can avoid the shock all together. The behaviors of turning and running parallel to the fence and running away from the fence increase as a result of negative reinforcement learning.

Animals can learn to do a lot of different behaviors that allow them to avoid unpleasant consequences. Aggression can be learned in this way, for example. The dog is lying on the couch. The owner tries to get the dog off the couch by dragging him off the couch by his collar. This, of course, is unpleasant to the dog, so he growls and snaps at the owner. The owner backs away from the threatening dog and the dog learns that by threatening the owner he can avoid being dragged off the couch.

Because both punishment and negative reinforcement make use of unpleasant consequences, both kinds of learning can have undesirable consequences such as causing fear and aggression. When actively teaching animals, it’s better to avoid these techniques or use them cautiously.

It’s important when we try to understand the behavior of our animals to understand what is motivating them. Positive reinforcement (rewards), negative reinforcement and punishment all shape and mold the behavior of our animals and ourselves.

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