

NEWSLETTER

WebParenTip vol 7, # 11 for November 1, 2006

LEAST REINFORCING BEHAVIOR

It's pretty simple when you are dealing with kids you want to civilize. The basic Rules of Discipline are: 1) Reward good behavior and 2) Don't reward bad behavior.

Parents can take a lesson about not rewarding bad behavior from dolphin trainers. A recent New York Times article on animal trainers was written by Amy Sutherland (June 25, 2006). We all know that animal trainers immediately reward a desired behavior with a small food treat. Dolphin trainers at Sea World San Diego use what they call least reinforcing syndrome (L.R.S) when a dolphin exhibits an undesirable behavior or does something wrong. The trainer does not respond at all. The trainer stands still, does not look at the dolphin and after a short time goes back to the work of training.

The basic psychological principle behind this is that ANY response from the trainer whether a positive or a negative response reinforces the behavior. If there is no response from the trainer the behavior is likely to be extinguished, to go away.

The NYT writer reported trying this technique on her husband with success. I began using it on my new dog. When she had trouble distinguishing between an antique oriental carpet and the outdoor dog yard easily accessible through a doggy door, I didn't do the old stuff like rubbing her nose in it or exclaiming, "Bad dog!" I merely picked her up and put her in her crate without a word and without any eye contact. I was even thinking about dolphin training not dogs urinating in the wrong place and cultivating a facial expression of total disinterest in my dog. It worked!

(By the way my dog, a Cavalier King Charles Spaniel, is of course the most beautiful dog in the world. Photo sent on request)

OK, the technique works on dolphins, husbands, and spaniels. What about children? For many years I have been warning parents that when it comes to child discipline parents tend to say too much and to personalize what they are saying. “Stop that right now! I’ve told you a million times to stop hitting your brother! You’re supposed to love your brother! If I catch you hitting him one more time, I don’t know what I’ll do! Wait until I tell your father!” Blah-blah-blah.

The LEAST REINFORCING RESPONSE is “Tommy, the rule is no hitting. Time-out.” said quietly and firmly. Think of dolphins, not misbehaving little boys.

Trust me, in ALL mammals the less reinforcement of an undesirable behavior the better.