



Out-of-Session: An Animal Trainer's Thoughts on Out-of-Session Reinforcement Value of Yourself

Jason Brad Putter*

Department of Marine Mammals, Independent, South Africa

*Corresponding Author: Jason Brad Putter, Department of Marine Mammals, Independent, South Africa.

Received: November 10, 2022

Published: November 12, 2022

© All rights are reserved by **Jason Brad Putter**.

To all animal trainers, DIY trainers, veterinarians, marine mammal specialists, zoological specialists, zookeepers, rangers, and everyone in between. Your Presence is always noticed when you are around an animal, they are always watching what we do, and our actions can reinforce/punish them outside a formal training session, so it is always important to remember that your actions will influence the behaviours that are presented.

How do we become reinforcing/punishing?

- The most straightforward answer: Association, Passive Learning, Classical Conditioning 101. But most trainers use operant conditioning methods, correct?
- That may be true, but even when using operant conditioning, we still pair the reinforcement with a person/trainer/vet, which creates an association. This gives the person reinforcing a positive or negative value.
- Why would we use punishment if we try and only use positive reinforcement?
- Punishment can come in various forms; all that punishment means there is an addition/subtraction of an appetitive/adverse stimulus, respectively, to decrease the frequency of a behaviour occurring again; it does not mean something awful.
- Taking your dog to the vet, for instance, can be regarded as a punisher because the association of veterinarian procedures can be a negative experience for the animals, to the point that your animal knows your routine to get them to the Vet.

Now that we understand how we become reinforcing or punishing to our animals, I want to address how we use that outside

of a formal training session. We as trainers are always focused on these aspects during our training sessions, but even once you step out of that "circle" of training, the animals are still learning, still interacting with you and their environment creating new experiences and learning from those experiences; they aren't robots that switch off as soon as that "circle" is gone. "Training" is a constant for animals, and we should keep that in mind when planning any behaviour or change in behaviour when caring for and stimulating any animal.

Using yourself as a reinforcer can train new behaviours and practice already learned behaviours. Still, the tricky part is to use it effectively, which is achieved by making yourself a positive reinforcer, purposefully pairing yourself with a primary reinforcer to achieve that positive value and, like any new reinforcer/behaviour, starting training yourself as a reinforcer inside of a formal training session by using a continuous reinforcement schedule, once you are confident that they are being reinforced with your presences. You may start using yourself as a reinforcer in formal training sessions to reinforce behaviours and then move on to doing it out of session, putting your reinforcement value onto a varied schedule of reinforcement.

Now that you have become a positive reinforcer, you may use yourself to make every day and every interaction a teaching moment, enriching your animals' lives and achieving your behavioural goals at an increased speed. One of the key elements to keep in mind when using yourself as a reinforcer is to remember not to reinforce the wrong behaviour accidentally. Reinforcing "Unwanted Behaviours" are behaviours that you, as a trainer, decide you do not want to be part of the animal's repertoire or could promote a

dangerous situation; however, this should not stop you from using this method, remember "Unwanted Behaviours" can be removed with extinction techniques and proper behaviour modification planning.

At the end of this article, I want to appeal to the reader always to be aware that they could be training their animals outside a formal training session, whether you are around a pool or in your backyard. You may have only started training animals recently or have been training animals for quite some time so remember, you are constantly being watched; I have come across too many "Unwanted" or "Problem" behaviours that were reinforced/punished by the presents of a trainer outside of the training "circle". Correcting these "Unwanted" or "Problem" behaviour is possible through special awareness by the trainer when they are operating in the training environment. This will indirectly guide the trainer's behaviour as they will be more aware that their influence on the animals reaches beyond the training "circle".