Griffith, Ginnie

**Reinforcement**

Reinforcement, according to Skinner, both strengthens a behavior and rewards the person (Feist, J., Feist, G., & Roberts, T., 2013). Any behavior that increases the probability of being repeated is strengthened through reinforcement. It is broken into two categories, positive reinforcement and negative reinforcement. Positive reinforcement is any stimulus that follows a behavior and increases the likelihood that the behavior is repeated. The basic human needs are often thought of as positive reinforcers: food, water, sex, social approval, and physical comfort are some examples. Negative reinforcement is an adverse stimulus that when it’s removed from the situation, the likelihood that the behavior is repeated increases. Anxiety is a common adverse stimulus that leads to several negative reinforcers: drinking alcohol, drug use, smoking cigarettes are several examples (Feist, J., Feist, G., & Roberts, T., 2013).

I use reinforcement regularly when training my dog, Bella. She is a Border collie and very smart which makes reinforcement very easy because she catches on quickly. The first use of reinforcement came when potty training her. The hardest part of reinforcing this behavior was trying to be consistent. It was a very frustrating process and at first did not seem to work but after creating a schedule for the behavior to occur and continuous reinforcement I quickly saw improvement. The schedule included consistent times to go outside for potty training and after the desired behavior of going to the bathroom occurred, I positively reinforced with verbal encouragement like “good girl” and petting her. I did this every time she would perform the behavior and after the reinforcement of just telling her “good girl” ran out of its reinforcement qualities, I used treats instead after the behavior was performed. The use of positive reinforcement led to increase probability that she would go to the bathroom outside instead on in the house.

I also use positive reinforcement to train Bella to perform tricks and tasks. At first, I wanted her to perform the task of running after a Frisbee and bringing it back to me. There were several parts of this task I had to complete before I could reach the goal of her actually getting the Frisbee then bringing it back. The first step was going after the Frisbee, this took some time to complete because of her lack of concentration as a puppy. Finally, after a couple of weeks of continuous reinforcement in the forms of verbal encouragement she would run to the Frisbee. The next step was picking the Frisbee up, this came quicker than running after it. I again used continuous verbal encouragement when she picked it up. The last step was bringing it back to me, which seemed to be the hardest part. I was using continuous verbal encouragement but that did not seem to be enough reinforcement at this point. So I started to combine verbal encouragement with her favorite treats, carrots. Every time she would pick up the Frisbee and start to move towards me with it I would pull out a carrot and give it to her. Every time she would move closer towards me I would give her a carrot until finally she brought it to my feet.

There has only been one incident where I have had to use negative reinforcement, but it did not turn out as I had hoped. After surgery to have Bella spayed the vet gave me painkillers to ease her discomfort if she needed it. She was wining and not acting her normal perky self and I could tell she was becoming uncomfortable, so I decided to give her a painkiller. With the warning of a possible upset stomach I gave her a little food before giving her the pill. About thirty minutes later she seemed to be feeling a little better and finally went to sleep, but about an hour after giving her the pill she became violently sick. She had been feeling less pain from the surgery but more discomfort from the painkiller. Any hopes that she wouldn’t be afraid to take pills was eliminated by her becoming sick. This could have been an example of negative reinforcement if giving her the painkiller only eased her pain and not made her sick.

I have found much success with positive reinforcement in training. After training Bella to perform several tricks and fetch practically anything that can be thrown she has caught onto reinforcement very well. I can reinforce a behavior on command in several days rather than weeks now with a combination of verbal encouragement and treats. Positive reinforcement has helped me a great deal in training and I will continue to use it with Bella to perform new behaviors in the future.

Feist, J., Feist, G., & Roberts, T. (2013). *Theories of personality*. (8th ed., pp. 119-123). New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.