



Psychotherapy and Life Coaching

for Children, Teens, and Women

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Dolphin Training 101



Have you ever seen the dolphin show at the Indianapolis Zoo? If so, you know that the trainers reward desirable behaviors and ignore undesirable behaviors. Because dolphin brains and human brains are similar, dolphin

training works well with everyone, including children, spouses, bosses, and employees.

The Training Program

When a trainer wants a dolphin to perform a particular behavior, close approximations are initially rewarded. In psychology, we use the term shaping. If the desired behavior is a vocalization

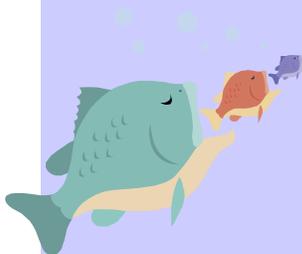
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Angela Hunnicutt, Ph.D., HSPP, CPC
9247 N. Meridian St., Ste. 104
Indianapolis, IN 46260
(317) 501-5381

www.psychotherapyandlifecoaching.com

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(clicking for a dolphin or talking for a human), any vocalization is initially rewarded, then only the vocalizations close to the desired one is rewarded, and finally only the particular vocalization is rewarded. Anything undesirable is ignored. Neither a positive nor a negative response is given—no response at all is given, and the trainer returns to the training.



Rewards are in the form of attention, positive physical touch, and fish.

While food is often reinforcing to humans, perhaps other rewards are preferable for good health (unless it's fish!). Certainly, physical touch, such as a hug or kiss, can be rewarding to our children, spouses, or other close family members. For a boss, employee, or less intimate relationship, a high five, fist bump, or pat on the back can be encouraging. Positive attention might be a simple thank you, praise, acknowledging someone's effort, or spending time together. Of course, tangible rewards, such as flowers, toys, plaques, or bonuses can be given, but be sure to vary rewards from tangible to

intangible or the behavior will only occur in response to tangible rewards.

Training in the Real World

You know the typical scenario. Your kid or spouse leaves a wet towel on the bathroom floor, and you tell him/her for the 100th time to pick it up and quit leaving it on the floor. You know it won't do any good, but you don't know what else to do.

Enter Dolphin Training 101. Stop paying attention to the wet towel on the floor. I know it's easier said than done. Do not say anything about the wet towel until or unless it gets picked up. Then, respond positively and enthusiastically (but NOT sarcastically or unrealistically). For example, "Thank you so much for picking up your wet towel. It made it so easy to clean up the rest of the bathroom." The wet towel doesn't get picked up? Shaping begins. "Thank you for not leaving your wet towel in the middle of the floor." Or, if it was left on the side of the tub, "Thank you for getting your wet towel off of the floor."

Will It Work?

According to Amy Sutherland in her New York Times article,

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“What Shamu Taught Me About a Happy Marriage,” she secretly and successfully changed her spouse’s behavior. What’s more, after she told him about it, he secretly and successfully changed her behavior. We all know that nagging is not working. If anything, the “trainer” becomes more resentful and the behavior stays the same or, in some cases, worsens. What have you got to lose? Look at it as an experiment, and observe the results! If you scream, rant, and rave at your spouse for leaving dishes in the sink, but say nothing when all the dishes are washed, dried, and



put away, do not expect the latter to occur very often.

When Doesn't It Work?

Obviously, leaving a wet towel on the floor is a relatively minor behavior. In that respect, Dolphin Training 101 is akin to the principle, “Pick Your Battles.” A wet towel is not

worth a huge battle, but other behaviors are more significant.

You cannot simply ignore violent or sexually inappropriate behavior. It is appropriate in those situations to firmly and immediately stop the behavior and state that such behavior is unacceptable. However, Dolphin Training 101 does apply to some extent. Lecturing a child for an hour about hitting a peer will likely be ineffective.

Furthermore, only noticing someone’s behavior when acting inappropriately increases the likelihood of that behavior recurring. A firm, but terse, response to misbehavior will keep the attention to a minimum. Frequent, positive responses to desired behavior will not eliminate misbehavior, but they will increase the likelihood of desired behavior.

See also, [Kicken, Bitten, and Scratched: Life and Lessons at the Premier School for Exotic Animal Trainers](#) (2006) by Amy Sutherland

