

Bars and Graphs
(It's not happy hour yet.)
By Sandra Kruczek

You've worked hard teaching your dog to greet people nicely at the door. He's really doing well. No more paws on shoulders. No more shredded clothes. He's sitting politely and waiting to be petted. He can take a treat from your guests without taking their hand with it. You've set the bar high. You've got him where you want him. He's going to stay there. Now that job is over. Is it?

My friend who keeps me updated with her perspective on raising her first dog said, "You know, I used to think that once I taught my Labrador, Riggins what to do when people came to the door, that there was no more work to be done. Well that wasn't the case at all. I had to periodically reinforce his good behavior with a special treat or he would start to ad lib with his own ideas."

Picturing a graph of your training progress with any given exercise, like greeting people at the door, would look like a saw tooth with ups and downs and leveling off in a straight line for a bit. Hopefully the lines would continue to go in an upward direction with little dips down, then upward again.

Without frequent reinforcement of the behavior you want, previously once strong behaviors tend to break down. Little things creep into your dog's stellar performance. You may see that maybe he's not so quick to sit or jumps up a bit then sits back down. You might think, oh well, at least he's not as bad as he used to be. (happily mugging everyone who came through the door) Ahh, but here is the slippery slope of regression.

The principles of learning, behavior and reinforcement are the same across the board for humans and animals. I love the humorous but powerful statement, "You've gotten so good at your job that we don't need to pay you anymore." How long would your good job performance last with that policy from your employer? We get a paycheck to maintain our work and perhaps a bonus for a really special effort. It keeps us enthusiastic and we keep our skill level up to speed.

Remember to frequently reinforce your dog with a special yummy treat to maintain his already good behavior. Keep him interested and working on his skills. Treat yourself too. You've work hard to get there.

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