

Optimism – the gift that keeps on giving

A human's tendency towards optimism or pessimism is referred to as judgment bias. We're probably all familiar with the glass of water test. Present a human with a glass partially filled with water and ask, "Is the glass half full or half empty?" Optimists claim the glass is half full, while pessimists claim the glass is half empty. That perception or bias is how individuals perceive events in their world.

Optimism and pessimism are not fixed traits though; rather, they're on a spectrum. These traits can shift based on positive and negative life experiences and in specific contexts. Optimism and pessimism are also tied to emotion. So judgment bias can give us a window into a human's emotional state at any given time.

Judgment bias also applies to dogs. And training methods can have a big impact. Researchers have learned that dogs trained using positive methods (rewarding desirable behaviour) were found to be more optimistic than those trained using aversive methods (physical or verbal punishment for undesirable behaviour). The dogs trained with physical and verbal punishment had higher levels of stress hormones and stress behaviours.

The good news is we can influence where our dogs sit on the optimism/pessimism spectrum. And while this is important for all dogs — puppies to seniors — it's of particular importance for rescue dogs.

Optimism games

Playing optimism games with your dog helps them learn that something ambiguous (is it good or is it bad?) or novel (I've never seen *that* before!) is nothing to worry about. By playing the right games, dogs learn that ambiguous or novel things result in a good outcome/make good stuff happen.

Optimism games are particularly important for puppies. Not only do these games get puppies off to a good start, they also help maintain an adult dog's optimism. Let's face it, things can happen over our lifetime that chip away at our confidence and optimism. The same applies to dogs and in some cases, more so for rescue dogs. Playing and topping up optimism throughout their lifetime is a gift you can give your dog. Many senior dogs love and benefit from the mental stimulation that optimism games bring. Plus, optimism games are easy and low pressure for your dog. They're also perfect for young children who want to be involved in your dog's training. And if your dog tends to eat quickly, optimism games can also be used as an alternative to bowl feeding.

Playing, observing and adapting the game

By observing your dog's body language while playing an optimism game, you'll be able to better understand your dog by gauging both your dog's optimism and progress when you play these games multiple times.

Watch your dog's reaction and body language when presented with an optimism game. Does your dog jump right in with confidence and enthusiasm? If so, then it's time to increase the challenge. But if your dog is hesitant, perhaps he seems to stretch to 'sneak' a treat or retreat from the game, your dog is showing a lack of optimism. No need to worry though because you now know that optimism games can help shift your dog's spectrum toward optimism.

Cardboard Chaos is an excellent introduction to optimism games. Begin with a low-sided box your dog can easily step into. Remove the flaps. Toss a handful of kibble or treats into the box, then bring your dog into the room. Now observe as your dog investigates the box. As tempting as it may be, avoid luring or verbally encouraging your dog to play. For some dogs, especially those on the pessimistic side, this amounts to too much pressure. As mentioned above, if your dog avoids the box, this is information you can use to adapt the game the next time you play — simplify the game by using a flat piece of cardboard. As your dog's optimism grows, you can re-introduce a low-sided box and gradually increase the level of challenge by adding more boxes.



If your dog dives right in with gusto, it's time to make the game more challenging. Add more boxes in different configurations. Place treats in boxes, around boxes and under tilted boxes. Use large paper bags. Toss in some crumpled newspaper or packing paper, empty egg cartons, etc.



Noise Box is another easy optimism game. Place empty plastic water bottles, balls, empty drink cans with duct tape covering the opening, clean empty deli containers, etc. in a large container such as a kiddie pool, large Tupperware container or under-bed storage container. Sprinkle in some kibble or treats, then let your dog have at it! As with Cardboard Chaos, observe your dog's behaviour and body language, adapting the game to your dog as needed.



To maintain the novelty factor, it's important to regularly change the set-up of these games — different objects, different boxes, different placement.

Cardboard Chaos and Noise Box are just two of many optimism games. Playing optimism games and growing your dog's optimism is truly a gift you can give them, one that keeps giving.



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