

Magical Kongs

During workshops and seminars, people often ask me why the Kong in my training system is so ``magical'? It's no secret that I love to use Kong products to reinforce dogs; but, oftentimes, people have a hard time grasping why dogs are so intrigued by seeing, smelling, and playing with a Kong. This brings me back to a moment with a military trainer who wanted to buy my whistle. I use whistles as bridge signals; and after a few days of training together, he asked me, "May I buy your whistle?" I offered him one for free, but couldn't find any spares in my car. He insisted he buy this whistle I'd used over those last days together, and offered me \$500. I refused, asking him what was so special about this whistle. He told me he'd never seen dogs responding so well to a whistle, so this whistle must be special. Hmm. For a brief moment there,



I thought about opening a shop, and selling "magic whistles" and "magic Kongs" for \$500 each; instead, I opted to follow my ultimate goal - which is to continue teaching about the importance of operant conditioning and why it's so effective in creating and changing behavior.

Besides using whistle as bridge signals, I like to use Kongs as reinforcers. Of course, I use other reinforcers, as well, but the Kong is what I like the most. It's safe for animals, easy to handle, and never gives me a problem with their teeth. The traditional Dutch stainless steel pipes, often used in detection training, is not good for a dog's teeth. Additionally, many dogs don't like to play with steel pipes, so it's hard to select new dogs for this kind of program. Tennis balls have a special coating, so if your dogs play a lot with these they will damage the protective layer of their teeth.

The inventors of Kong did a really great job in designing such a multi-faceted product. I like the simplicity and smart design of the basic Kong. It's easy for dogs to grab with their teeth, is soft, and also strong. Dogs seem to love the structure of the Kong and the tension when they bite in it. The endurance of the material is great. Its form is fantastic because it doesn't roll away and will bounce in unexpected directions, keeping the dog busy. The sizing is done in a way we can use mini Kongs for our smallest dogs, and there is a specific scent dogs easily recognize... even over great distances. ...And if this not enough, we can fill our Kongs with various types of foods and spreads (drives dogs crazy!).

All this being said, the Kong is like the whistle when it's boiled down to basic animal behavior. It's a "secondary reinforcer" connected to "primary reinforcers" like PLAY or FOOD.

To further explain this, let's dive into some basic behavior lessons. A "secondary reinforcer" is any stimulus, object or activity that becomes reinforcing because it's repeatedly been paired with (precedes or occurs at the same time as) a "primary reinforcer". The pairing process is the association process that takes place through "respondent conditioning".

For example, a piece of music may reinforce because it's been paired with a pleasant experience. Within certain limits, almost any stimulus can become a secondary reinforcer (or punisher) as long as it occurs in the proper relationship to a primary reinforcer. The sight of simply picking up a leash to walk a dog becomes a secondary reinforcer because it's often been paired with a walk and play in the park. Both "the walk" and "play", are primary reinforcers. 'Tis the same with my magic whistle. It quickly became a secondary reinforcer after the sound was followed many times by food, praise, fun games, or the magical Kong; but many trainers make the mistake of not being consistent enough in their way of offering the primary reinforcer.

The secondary reinforcer is also called a "conditioned reinforcer". It's a discriminative stimulus, because its sets the occasion for a primary reinforcer or signals to the animal that a primary reinforcer will be coming. These secondary reinforcers can acquire powerful reinforcing effects in their own right, and often independently strengthens behavior.

A "primary reinforcer" is one related either the well-being and survival of the individual or the species. Food, liquid, proper temperature, skin or body comfort, sex, sleep and for the social animals like dogs and humans, contact and play, with others of one's kind. All of these can be primary reinforcers. For our dogs, the chance to play, explore, exercise, etc. can serve as primary reinforcers. And the Kong is offering this! They can chase it, play with it, play tug of war with us, and they can use their nose to explore and find it. All of this gives them needed exercise.

To conclude, all of these contribute to building training programs in a most efficient and effective way; and by layering all the different steps in the right order, we can make the Kong magical for our dogs! There are no special Kongs... only magical Kongs, conditioned by smart trainers!

Simon Prins

www.simonprins.com