

# Equine Learning Theory

## Learning Theory

Learning theory describes the processes through which animals take in, process and retain information for future use. Key to ethical training is operant conditioning, which encompasses negative and positive reinforcement and punishment. "Positive" and "negative" are meant in a mathematical sense (addition and subtraction), rather than in the value sense of "good" and "bad".



## Negative Reinforcement

The removal of an aversive stimulus, such as an aid (pressure) to reward a desired behaviour. For example, squeezing with your calves and releasing this squeeze when your horse moves forward. It is the removal of the aid that teaches – not the aid itself

## Positive Reinforcement

The addition of an attractive stimulus (something the horse desires) after the desired response is given. For example, giving your horse a treat for touching a target. Research shows that positive reinforcement can improve the horse-human relationship.

## Negative Punishment

The removal of an attractive stimulus in response to an undesired behaviour in an attempt to make this response less likely in the future. For example, not providing water for your horse after he did not behave well under saddle.

## Positive Punishment

The addition of an aversive stimulus in response to an undesired behaviour in an attempt to make this response less likely in the future. For example, whipping a horse for refusing a jump.

## Key Takeaways

- Reinforcement makes the behaviour more likely in the future.
- Punishment does not teach the horse the desired behaviour and as such has a negative effect on learning as well as on the horse-human bond.
- Positive doesn't necessarily mean good, and negative doesn't necessarily mean bad.
- For equine welfare and rider safety, the correct application of learning theory is paramount.

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