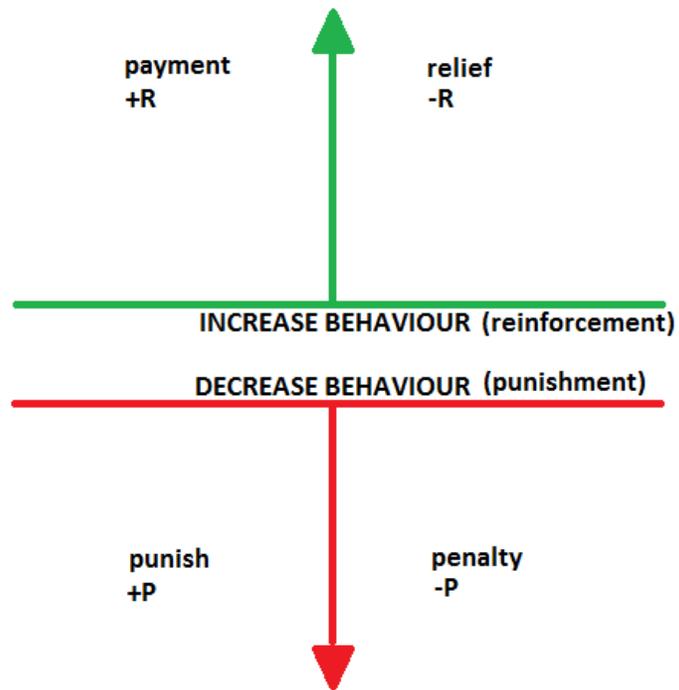


Can Snake Avoidance be achieved using “force-free” or “reward-based” methods?

To answer this question, the quadrants of reinforcement and punishment need to be understood.



Reinforcement and Punishment are the core tools through which behavior is modified. These terms are defined by their effect on behavior.

Using the above diagram which is universally acknowledged as true science, we can see that behavior is decreased by using +P or –P, which is to punish or deliver a penalty.

In Snake Avoidance, are we attempting to increase, or decrease a particular behavior? In fact, we are trying to persuade a dog to decrease its behavior of engaging/investigating reptiles.

From our core tools we need to select a tool that decreases behavior. This leaves us with +P and –P.

Both of these tools have strengths and weaknesses.

**The use of +P (Punishment)**

Strength: Positive punishment is not dependent on a dog's desire to obtain a reward, or by the dog's state of drive (emotional arousal).  
When the consequence is understood, there is no requirement for handler presence.  
The dog no longer exhibits the behavior due to the consequence.

Weakness: Positive punishment can be emotionally taxing on a dog as there is a level of physical discomfort. Expertise in canine behavior & temperament and in the delivery of Positive punishment is essential to deliver the correct timing and more importantly, the correct dosage of punishment. The dog's emotional state must be constantly assessed and tested after each correction.

Each dog has its own temperament and the temperament dictates the duration of training that can be delivered in a single session.

If applied incorrectly, the dog can draw inaccurate conclusions about the source or cause of the punishment

Positive punishment is politically controversial to some.

**The use of -P (Penalty)**

Strength: No physical discomfort.  
Politically correct.

Weakness: The dog must currently desire the reward being offered.  
The dog's unwanted behavior must be occurring in an attempt to obtain the reward offered.

Since only +P (Punishment) and -P (Penalty) are suitable for reducing behavior, the one which is applicable should be used.

-P Penalty cannot be used as the moment a live reptile appears, the dog's desire immediately shifts away from the reward being offered and focuses only on the reptile. Withholding what the dog no longer wants is ineffective. The dog has chosen to totally disregard the reward offered.

+P Punishment must be used since when it is applied, the dog's desire for the reptile immediately ceases. Since the reptile is no longer attractive to the dog, the dog can only now shift its focus back to the reward being offered.

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# Canine Snake Avoidance International PTY LTD

In an attempt to avoid using +P (Punishment) some have tried utilizing a technique called Differential reinforcement. This technique has strengths and weaknesses also.

## Differential reinforcement

Differential reinforcement is a type of management technique that engages a dog in an activity to distract the dog from unwanted behavior. The idea being that if the dog is engaged with some other activity it is not engaging with a reptile.

**Strengths:** As the dog is not being punished in any way, this technique serves to preserve the currently unwanted behavior. This is important in situations where a dog may later be required to engage in the currently unwanted behavior. For example, sheep-herding.

**Weakness:** The unwanted behavior is preserved.  
Constant handler presence is essential.  
The dog must currently desire the reward being offered

Differential reinforcement cannot be used for Snake Avoidance due to the fact that the vast majority of dogs prefer the reptile to any reward being offered. Furthermore this training simply serves to preserve the reptile-engaging behavior.

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## Conclusion

The best method of snake avoidance training should not be reliant on a single core tool. To be successful multiple tools should be employed together in harmonious cooperation to discourage reptile engaging behavior while rewarding the alternative desirable behavior.

When the dog approaches the reptile, it receives a correction. The dog quickly backs away from the reptile (source of discomfort) and for this receives food/praise. After rewarding/praising the desired response, our trainer becomes neutral to allow the dogs' attention to refocus on the reptile thus permitting the dog to make another decision. The dog quickly learns what behavior causes an unpleasant consequence to occur and which behavior maintains its own physical comfort and even brings additional rewards.

The discovery of a reptile becomes a non-verbal cue to perform a behavior:

- **Walk away**
- **Stop and remain still**
- **Return to handler**

It is important to remember:

A dog can't be punished for a behavior it did not do.

A dog can't be rewarded for a behavior it did not do.

*While it may appear to some that the dog is being rewarded for NOT engaging the snake, this is not what's occurring. The dog is, in fact, being rewarded for displaying a desired behavior, for example returning to and focusing on the handler.*

### **Alternative correction equipment**

Many years ago, in an attempt to preserve my electric collar for reward based applications I employed a vast range of alternative correction equipment. The air horn was one such piece of equipment utilized.

Due to the fact that some dogs found the noise invigorating, exciting and enjoyable, I had to have an electric collar ready on standby to 'step in' and take over the role as the correction tool if the air horn failed.

**The air horn is ineffective in the majority of cases however success was achieved in approximately 35% of dogs.**

The air horn while startling to some dogs, is actually rewarding to others. It is not the trainer or an ethics committee who decide if a stimulus is unpleasant or enjoyable...it is the dog itself.

Startle response

<https://youtu.be/Vbg707Dq2U8>

Invigorating response

<https://youtu.be/30rwHAB84QI>

Unusual response

<https://youtu.be/seOuPQ2ekGc>