

# On Behavior

## For Those Who Can't Wait . . . Generalizing Short Latencies the Bailey & Bailey Way

by Terry Long, CPDT

**Editor's note:** This column is based on a lecture by renowned animal trainer Bob Bailey at The Bailey & Bailey Chicken Workshop in Hot Springs, AR, in June 2002.

"*Sit!*" "*S-i-i-i-t!*" "*SIT!*" I said, "*Sit!!!!*" "*Good dog! What a nice sit.*"

Sound familiar? Most dog trainers are all too familiar with students who can't resist giving their dog multiple cues for any given behavior. Many of us are used to solving this double-cueing problem by coaching our students to give a cue once, and only once. Although many students comply, their dog still doesn't sit any faster in response to their cue.

If our real objective is to speed up the dog's response to a cue, it really has little to do with giving a cue once and then rewarding the behavior regardless of how long it takes the dog to do it. What we want, actually, is short latency. Latency is the time between the cue and the animal's response to the cue, and preferably, it is sooner than later. One of the most innovative ways to shorten latency is one that was used routinely by Marian and Bob Bailey and Animal Behavior Enterprises (ABE), their company that trained thousands of animals from over 140 different

species. This method relies upon tapping into an animal's ability to generalize and, surprising to many dog trainers, works quite well with dogs.

### Starting Fresh

"If you don't demand short latency in the training of new behaviors, you won't get it," said Bob Bailey. "At ABE, short latency was a routine aspect of all of our training of *any* behavior we taught. All behaviors are now, not later. So when you start to train a new behavior and you get the rudiments of that new behavior and can say that the behavior is 75-80% the way you want it to look, interject latency as a criterion. Don't train all the way to fluency and then try and require short latency," he added.

Often, ABE would be hired to fix a training problem. They would be sent an animal that had been trained well to begin with, but over time had been allowed to develop slow responses to its new trainer's cues. It was in these cases that the Baileys developed their own way of retraining latency using generalization as a key ingredient.

### Retraining: Keep it Simple

You start the retraining process by making the decision to set aside two or three days where you do not

allow the dog to receive cues or reinforcement for any behaviors other than the one you are going to start with. In some cases this means crating the dog or managing the dog's environment in a way that ensures total control over the dog's interaction with anyone but you in these new training sessions. That means no cues for *anything* until you have completed the retraining process. "The key part of this is that you are not training *anything* else," said Bob. "The animal's life is built around this one behavior. You get a very strong response as a result."

"Another reason for not training other behaviors [during this process] is that the dog will learn to discriminate between the behavior you are working on to shorten latency and the other behaviors where you don't demand short latency," Bob noted, explaining, "Why *not* demand it on all behaviors? Well, consider the rate of reinforcement. You have upped the criteria on *everything* the animal does, thus likely reducing substantially the rate of reinforcement, possibly causing the animal to decide to not play your 'silly little game.'"

The following steps describe the retraining process. Bob advises, "Once you start this, don't wait a week [between training sessions]

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to do this. Once you start, don't train anything else. Get all current, well-trained behaviors on short latency with this process. (For training new behaviors later, see "Starting Fresh," above.)

**1) Pick a very, very simple behavior**—You will start with a behavior that is on cue and is well known to the dog. One that Bob suggested was the "Touch" cue, i.e., the dog touches his nose to your hand or a target stick. (If the dog only knows more complicated behaviors, first take a few days to train three or four simple behaviors such as "Touch," "Sit," "Down," etc.)

**2) Establish a reasonable latency**—For the "Touch" example, a half a second may be a reasonable response time according to Bob (think "one thous" instead of "one thousand one.") However, the time criterion selected by the trainer should be whatever makes sense to the trainer. As Bob noted, "It is really more a matter of maintaining a high enough rate of reinforcement rather than some arbitrary interval between cue and response. The criterion should be high enough that the animal has enough failure to learn that what it was doing is not right, but not so high that the animal becomes discouraged."

When the dog responds within your established time criterion, click and treat. Counting that time starts when you have given the cue and ends when the dog *starts* the response. The *click* happens when

the dog's nose touches the target.

**3) Too slow, withdraw the opportunity for reinforcement**—If the dog doesn't respond within the time you have set as your beginning criterion, withdraw the target and end that trial. Wait two to three seconds and begin a new trial. Don't be tempted to raise your voice or add other secondary cues to prompt the dog.

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**4) Keep training sessions short but frequent**—Train for two to three minutes ten times a day. Remember not to provide any reinforcement for any other behaviors during this process.

**5) Tighten your latency criterion**—Once the dog is responding within the half-second period of time, raise your expectations to a third of a second or whatever you as a trainer are capable of shortening it to or whatever is reasonable for the simple behavior you have chosen to work with first. Get this shorter latency as fast as you can. It could take one day, it could take two.

**6) Pick another very simple behavior**—Before you start another training session, pick another simple behavior. First, start out by cueing your original, simple behavior, e.g., "Touch," and after you have cued and reinforced that behavior with its short latency several times, smoothly interject the cue for your second simple behavior. Very likely, without thinking, the dog will give you the previously slow behavior very quickly. Click, treat, and cue the original "Touch" again, alternating between the two very simple behaviors. Gradually ask for more and more of the second simple behavior and less and less of the original one.

**7) Pick two other simple behaviors**—You are on the homestretch! Pick two more simple behaviors. You will now alternate between the second and third behavior until the third behavior is being cued the majority of time, and then start to interject the fourth simple behavior until the fourth behavior is being cued the majority of the time.

### Generalization of Latency

"This short latency has generalized," explained Bob. "I'm not even going to offer a theoretical explanation about why. I have speculations, but I don't have any reason why it generalizes so well. Some things don't generalize, especially with dogs and some other animals. This generalizes very, very well. If you do it right, it's virtually guaranteed to work."

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“What you don’t want to do,” he continued, “is try to combine training the behavior or changing the shape of a behavior and trying to do this process at the same time. And you want to be sure every behavior I have described is well trained before throwing it into the process. By the time you get to the third or fourth behavior this way, you are going to be absolutely amazed at what happens.

“Virtually all of the behaviors cued are going to start to come very, very fast ... as long as you require it! If you know that you have successfully shortened the

latency on these three or four behaviors, now just give another cue, and if you don’t get it right away, you give a timeout, withdraw the opportunity, and the animal catches on very quickly [that the new criterion applies to all other cued behavior].”

### **Latency as a way of life**

For those who choose not to wait—or to recue—short latencies are something we can get from our own dogs and from our students’ dogs. All we have to do is ask for it!

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*Bob Bailey began training in the late 1950s and was a pioneer in the open ocean use of dolphins while he was the director of training for the U.S. Navy. He, and his late wife, Marian Breland Bailey, PhD, began teaching dog trainers in 1996, using chickens as behavioral models. For more information about Bailey & Bailey workshops, go to [www.hsnp.com/behavior](http://www.hsnp.com/behavior).* 