

Reward-Based Training

Dog training is becoming more popular and with it reward-based training. Understanding reward-based training and properly applying this method is the key to a successful training experience. Although reward-based training has one main principal, the use of a reward to increase and maintain a taught behavior, there are more elements to it. I often find myself answering the following questions for my students: What is the best reward for my dog? What and when exactly should I be reinforcing and when should I stop reinforcing? Often, new dog owners and/or first time dog trainers are overwhelmed by the large amount of new information but should not be discouraged. Here are some quick notes to reinforcement and its main ideas.

The first thing in reward-based training is to find the best reward for your dog. Even before you start any formal training you need to find out what your dog prefers; what does he love the most: food, dogs, and/ or people? Although most of my client's first reaction is to say "food", surprisingly enough, I have found in my training experiences that not all dogs are food motivated. More than often I find myself training a dog that prefers dogs over anything else or the environment in itself. Although these dogs are more challenging to train they are not impossible. Take a moment to evaluate your dog and access his drives. An easy way to do it is just by thinking: if you had treats, people and dogs lined up which would your dog go to first?

Second, timing is important in dog training. You want to use an indicator such as a "yes" to specify what he/she did was right and that exact behavior got him the reward. You want to use the indicator at the exact moment (and follow it with a treat) so that he associates the specific action with the treat and will repeat that same behavior again. Remember that whatever behavior you are reinforcing you are increasing the probabilities of your dog repeating that behavior.

Third, it is important to realize that the reward is a consequence to good behavior and not a bribe. If you find yourself that your dog doesn't listen to you unless he sees the reward, such as a treat, than you are using the reward incorrectly. All treats should be hidden either inside your pockets or a closed fist. You always want to give the treat after the behavior was completed. It is tempting to have our treats ready or to put our hands in our pockets as preparation but dogs are great at reading body language. With body cues such as these they are able to predict when they are going to get treats and when they are not. This is what causes discrepancies in their response to your cues.

So now that you know the basics of reinforcement here are some additional notes. You always want to reinforce heavily for new behaviors, this can be called the learning stage, to make a great impact. You want your dog to believe it is on their best interest to perform the behaviors we ask them to. Once they are performing perfectly at home add distractions to make it more challenging. You want to be gradually moving forward and stop reinforcing easy behaviors. If you notice that your dog's performance level is declining you probably faded the treats too early to improve simply increase your reinforcement quantity. Make training fun and exciting for your dog by mixing up the rewards or changing treats. Remember that your want to leave your dog wanting more!