

Let's Learn About



Positive
Reinforcement

Positive Reinforcement: What is it, and how do you use it?

If you are like most people you'd rather be praised than punished, right? That's the idea behind positive reinforcement! When you have a bad experience, you'll try to avoid it from happening again. But if you have a good experience doing something, you're likely to want to repeat that experience. Dogs are the same way! When your dog does something you want, giving him something he enjoys like food or toys will make him want to do it again. Many older training techniques relied on punishment which can make the dog want to avoid training or even worse avoid you, the owner.

Using positive reinforcement makes training fun for you and your dog. Each time you reward your dog you make him more likely to repeat what he was doing when you rewarded him. You will also strengthen your relationship with your dog because you have shown him what makes you happy and have made him happy as well. A win-win situation!

A **lure** is extremely useful when teaching new tasks, overcoming uncertainty or fear in the dog, and to increase the dog's focus on you. A dog that is uncertain about a given task or working on a piece of equipment or unusual flooring can often be lured successfully. By using a lure to make yourself and your actions of greater interest to the dog, a lure can be a quick way to establish a relationship. A lure is offered before a behavior is elicited and either directly assists in guiding/shaping the behavior or minimizing/eliminating the stumbling blocks of confusion or fear.

A **reward** is a chance to say, "Thanks - I really like it when you do that!" This can range from a quiet thanks or pat on the head, to an exuberant dance of delight or a shower of treats. A reward is always unexpected, unseen and comes after the appropriate behavior or response.

Choose lures/rewards from a variety of things your dog loves. Food is one thing that most dogs love and is easy to carry around in your pocket. Toys, petting, and praise can also be positive reinforcers. Verbal praise is always good, but in very distracting situations may not be motivating enough for some dogs. Toys are great too, but can take more time because you have to stop and let your dog play. Using food is usually the most convenient for luring & rewarding, but what if your dog doesn't like treats? Experiment with types of treats – different types of deli meats, chicken, steak, cheese, or different commercially prepared treats. Most dogs have a favorite food; you just have to be creative to discover what it is. Or try hand-feeding part of your dog's daily food. Before you put your dog's food bowl down, ask him to sit and offer him a piece of kibble.



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Another way of using positive reinforcement is using a “life reward.” A life reward involves allowing your dog to do what he wants as a reward for good behavior. Life rewards can be as simple as having your dog sit before he walks through a door (the reward for sitting is getting to go outside), having your dog sit before throwing a Frisbee (the reward for sitting is getting to chase the Frisbee), or having your dog stop pulling before you continue walking (the reward for not pulling is continuing on the walk). By using a life reward you can strengthen a behavior that the dog might not want to do by allowing it to do something it really wants to do.

Now that you know what lures and rewards are, how do you use them?

- Treats/rewards can be used to initially lure a dog into a position, and then once the dog performs the command reliably, to reward behavior.
- Your ultimate goal is to get your dog to respond properly without having to reward him every time.
- The key to using rewards is to vary them; don't always give the same treat or use the same toy or game. Be inventive, not boring.
- It is also important to add the occasional “jackpot,” i.e. an extra special reward for extra special behavior (similar to people using slot machines.) An extra large number of treats makes an extra big impression on the dog and greatly increases the likelihood of a repeat performance.
- Phase out the use of treats as a lure, and decrease the amount of treats as rewards. You never phase treats as a reward out entirely because you want to keep your dog wondering when he will get a reward.
- How do you prevent creating a dog who will only listen when you have a treat in your hand? Fade away the lure as soon as possible, but still use it as a reward. When you can reliably get your dog to change positions (sit, stand, down) with a lure in your hand, it is time to stop using the lure. Continue moving your hand as though it still holds the lure, as a hand signal for the dog. Keep the treat hidden in your other hand, or a pocket until the dog completes the behavior. Then take it out and give it to your dog. Have a party and tell him how smart he is! Also ask more of your dog for a reward. Instead of giving a treat every time, give one every other time, then just for the best responses.

Three ways to prevent dependence upon a treat:

Keep your dog guessing when.

- Ask for more behaviors for fewer rewards.
 - Increase the number of position changes for a treat.
- Be unpredictable (keep your dog guessing when he will be getting a treat.)
- Rewarding behavior occasionally makes the behavior stronger, because the dog never knows when the reward is coming and the frustration of not being reinforced every time will often lead to faster and more vigorous responses.

Keep your dog guessing what.

- Vary the treats you offer.
- Offer a reward other than a treat.

Keep your dog guessing where.

- Don't always give a reward from the same hand.
- Don't always give a reward from the same pocket.
- Ask the dog to perform a behavior and then go get the reward from the other room.
- It is important to make sure that rewards are not always visible because dogs often learn that performing when no reward is visible means there will be no reward. Teach them otherwise by hiding rewards and offering them in a manner that is not predictable.



Marker Word:

A marker word is used to mark or capture the exact instant your dog does the wanted behavior. It can be any word you like, as long as it's one syllable and you can remember it easily. Some commonly used words are "Yes", "Good", or "Yay". Once you choose a marker word you have to pair it with a reward so your dog understands that whenever he hears that word he has done something right. Have a few treats in your hand and say "Yes" and give your dog a treat. Do that a few times in a row, and in two or three sessions when you say your marker word you should notice your dog looking around expectantly for his treat. Now your dog understands that the marker word (in this case "Yes") means a treat is coming, and you can start using it in training. For example, when you're teaching your dog to sit, as soon as his behind touches the ground you say your marker word to let your dog know that is the behavior you want, and follow it with a treat. Remember that dogs don't speak English, so we have to teach them what we want them to do when we say certain words. Having a specific marker word makes it easier for dogs to understand exactly what behavior they are being rewarded for. Usually when we use treats there is a several second delay between when the dogs does what we want, and when he gets the treat. In the meantime, he could've done several other things like wag his tail, look at something across the room or stand up again so when you give the treat your dog may not be exactly sure what behavior earned him the treat. Having a marker word helps end your dog's confusion because you can say the marker word at the correct moment and take some time to get the treat without confusing your dog.

Capturing:

To capture the behavior means to catch your dog doing the desired behavior without a lure or a verbal cue. Say your marker word immediately and follow with a reward. Use this technique when your dog looks at you for direction or when he sits when you stop walking. Your dog will be more likely to offer polite behavior if it is rewarded in everyday life.



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