

Reinforcement and use of Rewards

Find out what your dog likes and he'll be eating out of your hand!

What does your dog like?

Identify your dog's primary reinforcers (PR), those things your dog wants and will work hard to attain. It could be a favorite toy, a specific kind of food (identify each one your dog likes and rank them), playing tug or fetch, social interaction such as petting and praise.

Reinforcers should be mixed up to surprise your dog. Use multiple reinforcement (extra quantities of treats, a longer tugging session, for instance) for training breakthroughs. This can be extremely effective.

Rank your rewards

To train most effectively, rank from low to high, your list of reinforcers. Which ones have the highest value to your dog? Match the reward to the behavior being trained and the situation. For example, in a highly distracting environment and you know that your dog's focus will be different and more difficult to maintain, use a very high value reward. Sit down now and make a list, then number them from most favorite to least favorite. This will be helpful to know when you are training for different behaviors. (See *Rewards List* handout for ideas.)

As a rule of thumb, for active behaviors, use active reinforcers. Examples of this include tugging or chasing a ball will be a reward for taking a series of jumps. A stationary activity, such as holding a contact can be rewarded with low-level food reinforcement.

It's starting to "CLICK"! (Secondary Reinforcers)

Secondary reinforcers are powerful communication tools. A secondary reinforcer, such as a clicker, is associated with the primary reinforcers, such as food or toys. It is used as a behavioral marker (also known as an event marker or bridge). A clicker, or the use of the word, *Yes!* are both secondary reinforcers used before the primary reinforcer, such as food, is given. The secondary reinforcer always comes first and is immediately followed by the primary reinforcer (food, tugging, etc.). Use of the secondary reinforcer is central to good clear behavior and it is critical that it occurs at the exact moment that your dog is performing the desired behavior. It marks the exact behavior that will then be reinforced with the use of a PR such as food, toy, game, praise, etc. (See the article "Clicker Training")

Timing is everything

If you want to click and treat for a sit, and your dog sits but then stands at the moment you click, what is being rewarded, the sit or the stand? You intended to reward the sit, but inadvertently, because your timing was off, the stand was marked instead. So timing and your attention to your dog's actions are very important.

Sometimes it's difficult to reward at the exact moment that the desired behavior is performed, especially since that could happen at a distance away from you, the handler. The SR acts as a bridge between the behavior and the reward. The PR should come directly after the SR, but it buys us some time, and timing is vital. The biggest training error is being late with the secondary reinforcers, such as the clicker.

Hitting the Jackpot!

Reward extremely well when your dog completes a particularly difficult behavior. "Jackpot" your dog, or give a "mega-reward", after a particularly exceptional effort. Just dole out the treats and keep giving them. This will make quite an impression!

Recommendation: For more about reinforcement and other great training information, read *In Focus* by Deborah Jones, PhD and Judy Keller, as well as the *In FOCUS Foundation Work DVD*.