



Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals

Copyright Dumb Friends League and Humane Society of the United States. All rights reserved.

Positive Reinforcement: **Training Your Dog or Cat with Treats and Praise**

Positive reinforcement is the presentation of something pleasant or rewarding immediately following a behavior. It makes that behavior more likely to occur in the future and is one of the most powerful tools for shaping or changing your pet's behavior.

Correct timing is essential when using positive reinforcement. The reward must occur immediately or your pet may not associate it with the proper action. For example, if you have your dog "sit," but reward him after he's already stood up again, he'll think he's being rewarded for standing up.

Consistency is also essential. Everyone in the family should use the same commands. It might be helpful to post these where everyone can become familiar with them. The most commonly used commands for dogs are "watch me," "sit," "down" (means lie down), "leave it" and "settle." Consistency means always rewarding the desired behavior and never rewarding the undesired behavior.

For your pet, positive reinforcement may include food treats, praise, petting or a favorite toy or game. Food treats work especially well for training your dog. A treat should be enticing and irresistible to your pet. It should be a very small, soft, piece of food, so that he will immediately gulp it down and look to you for more. If you give him something he has to chew or that breaks into bits and falls on the floor, he'll be looking around the floor, not at you. Small pieces of soft commercial treats, hot dogs, cheese, cooked chicken or beef, or miniature marshmallows have all proven successful. Experiment a bit to see what works best for your pet. You may carry the treats in a pocket or a fanny pack on the front of your belt. There are even special treat packs available in many pet stores.

Note: A very small number of pets are not interested in food treats, even extremely high value food treats, like boiled chicken or liver, sharp cheddar cheese, or vegetarian bacon strips. For those pets, the reward could be in the form of a toy or brief play.

When your pet is learning a new behavior, he should be rewarded every time he does the behavior (continuous reinforcement). It may be necessary to use "shaping," with your pet (reinforcing something close to the desired response and gradually requiring more from your dog before he gets the treat). For example, if you're teaching your dog to "shake hands," you may initially reward him for lifting his paw off the ground, then for lifting it higher, then for touching your hand, then for letting you hold his paw and finally, for actually shaking hands with you.

Intermittent reinforcement can be used once your pet has reliably learned the behavior. At first, you may reward him with the treat three times out of four, then about half of the time, then about a third of the time and so forth, until you're only rewarding him occasionally with the treat. Continue to praise him every time, although once he's learned the behavior, the praise can be less effusive - a quiet, but positive, "good boy." Use a variable schedule of reinforcement, so he doesn't catch on that he has to respond every other time. Your pet will learn that he keeps responding, eventually he'll get what he wants. If you have a dog who barks until you reward him by paying attention to him, you've seen the power of intermittent reinforcement.

By understanding reinforcement, you can see that you're not forever bound to carry a pocketful of goodies. Your pet will soon be working for your verbal praise, because your attention is reinforcing and he knows that occasionally, he'll get a treat, too! There are many small opportunities to reinforce his behavior. You may have him "sit" before letting him out the door (helps prevent door-darting), before petting him (helps prevent jumping up on people) or before giving him his food. Give him a pat or a "good dog" for lying quietly by your feet or slip a treat into his Kong toy when he's chewing it, instead of your shoe.

Punishment, including verbal, postural and physical, is the presentation of something unpleasant immediately following a behavior which makes it less likely that the behavior will occur again. To be effective, punishment must be delivered while your pet is engaged in the undesirable behavior, in other words, "caught in the act." If the punishment is delivered too late, your pet will feel "ambushed." From his point of view, the punishment is totally unpredictable, and he's likely to become fearful, distrusting and/or aggressive. This will only lead to more behavior problems. What we humans interpret as "guilty" looks, are actually appeasement gestures by our pet, meant to keep us from harming them. Animals don't have moral sense of right and wrong, but they are adept at associating your presence and the presence of a mess with punishment.

Because of the risks associated with the use of punishment, we recommended using positive reinforcement instead. Physical punishment usually involves some level of discomfort or even pain, which is likely to cause your pet to bite, as that is the only way he knows to defend himself. Scruff shakes and "alpha rolls" are likely to result in bites. Also, punishment might be associated with other stimuli, including people, that are present at the time the punishment occurs. For example, a pet that's punished for getting too close to a small child may become fearful of or aggressive to that child.

If you have any questions, or want to learn more about positive reinforcement-based training at our group classes, please call our behavior specialists at 713-869-7722, ext. 187, or email animals@hspca.org.