

The Use of Food in Dog Training

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One of the most common criticisms of clicker training is that it utilizes the most undeniably evil training tool of all time – food. Food, so say the critics, gets you an immediate and enthusiastic response but later makes the dog a slave to treats. If you don't always offer food, they say, the dog won't work for you. Another problem with food is that if the dog is not hungry, it will not work at all. The most interesting objection is that unless you continue to use food periodically, the behavior may disappear, which requires you to always carry treats. All of these objections highlight the need for some guidelines to help you use food in your training program without these seeming liabilities.

To clear the air a little, consider this: food is a necessary ingredient for survival – if you stop using it, the behavior does indeed die, along with the dog! In the “big picture”, you cannot stop feeding your dog; you may only decide what the food is to be used for. If food is to be used purely for nutrition, you abandon a powerful tool for shaping and maintaining behavior. If your dog gets his food gratis, what will you use to motivate him? The traditional answer has been force. The “do it or else” school always relies on a push, shove or jerk to enforce the behavior. Coincidentally, the use of force must be periodically repeated or your control goes away – just like positive reinforcement.

The real problem with positive reinforcement training is not that we use food; but the rate at which it is given, the reason it is given, and the assumption that food is the only positive reinforcement available. A more complete perspective would suggest that in the real world, animals are exposed to a very broad range of reinforcers and punishers. Traditional training often limits our use of reinforcement to simple options such as verbal praise vs. food, or choke chains vs. a squirt gun. These limitations lock the trainer into a method that may fail, not because it is invalid, but because it is only part of the solution. The answer lies in finding the difference between the artificial world of training and the “real” rules of nature. So, let's get REAL!

R: Raise your standards

E: Extras for excellence

A: Anticipate errors

L: Lots of repetitions

R: Raise your standards: Make it harder to earn a click and treat. Ask for two or more repetitions of the behavior, faster performance or enthusiasm before you reinforce the behavior. Be opportunistic and hit any of several criteria with bonuses. As the behavior takes shape, try to focus on one criterion at a time.

E: Extras for excellence: Start giving relatively large jackpots for exceptional performance. It helps to start the shift to variable reinforcement with a pretty big “positive kick in the pants”. While you might assume that the jackpot acts to identify which version of the behavior pays off most, it is more important to sustain the animal through the dry spells.

A: Anticipate errors: As you vary the reinforcement, the dog will start to vary its behavior. The experimentation is necessary in order to start moving away from constant reinforcement. The dog will adapt to this new set of rules by trying to figure out why the old level of performance is not working, and why some repetitions cause fantastic payoffs. The dog does not immediately know that you wanted a faster “down”, or a quicker “sit”.

L: Lots of Repetitions: Allow the animal a chance to practice the behavior enough to get comfortable with the new standards. Your immediate goal in varying the reinforcement is to get lots of repetition, not to get great performance. You are really trying to communicate “if at first you don’t succeed, try, try, again”.

NOTE: If you do not see garbage, you will not see the greatness. Varying the reinforcement will cause erratic behavior. If you trust the four rules of variable reinforcement, you will soon see great performance – after you see a great deal of garbage. You must allow the animal to experiment with this process. Do not be disappointed with failure, as long as the animal keeps trying. If you lose the behavior entirely, drop your standards and reinforce more often until the behavior comes back. Once you are getting consistent behavior again, go back to varying the reinforcement. To get an animal to modify the number of times it will work in the absence of reinforcement, or expend additional effort to gain the same reinforcement, depends on obeying this rule. Trainers who are afraid to broaden the spectrum of reinforcement create animals who are reluctant to take risks.

Another side effect of predictable reinforcement is performance that is too closely tied to a real expectation of success, i.e. the ringwise dog who only works when he sees food, or only works when he is hungry. Shifting away from fixed reinforcement causes confusion for many animals. The primary reason for getting “two-for-one” early in the shaping is to teach “you aren’t going to get a treat every time”. This variable reinforcement (VR) schedule is acceptable to most animals, and is usually an integral part of shaping – the animal is going to offer behaviors (mistakes) that go unreinforced. As you start to require more repetitions, or harder work, it will require a higher level of reinforcement to make the additional effort worthwhile. Pushing an animal too fast on a VR schedule may have a disruptive effect over the animal’s willingness to learn or perform.