



POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT TRAINING

The Sacramento SPCA uses positive reinforcement training in our classes and for the animals in our care. Multiple studies have shown this to be the most efficient and effective way to teach animals new behaviors and change problem behaviors.

Positive reinforcement isn't just for dogs. It works on cats, horses, even kids and spouses!

FOOD...AND MORE!

Positive reinforcement is more than simply giving treats to dogs. It means that we add/give something to the dog that causes an increase in behavior. Sound like the same thing? Not quite. Rewards (the technical term is *reinforcers*) come in many forms. The most common, and those that we have the most control over, are food, access, and attention.

FOOD

Food is a great training tool because it's inexpensive and portable, and all dogs like it. For classes and training around distractions, we want to use treats that our dog is really excited about. The ideal training treat is soft and easy to break in small pieces, like string cheese, chicken, or semi-moist food rolls found at your local pet or feed store.

In low-distraction settings, you can use your dog's regular food as training rewards, instead of feeding them all that food from a bowl. Or create a training trail mix using half their meal combined with a variety of high-value treats.

Many people are afraid that if they use food in their training program, they'll always have to use food to get the dog to behave. This stems from the old days of training, when training tools were used to compel behavior.

Modern training sets up exercises that produce the behaviors we want, then present the food after that behavior happens. See our training handouts for examples.

We never want to stop rewarding good behavior—if it stops being rewarding for the dog, their motivation to work for us may decrease! However, once they've learned new behaviors, we can incorporate other types of rewards, so we have a variety of ways to reward good behavior.

ACCESS

Depending on the scenario, there is almost always something your dog wants access to: people, places, objects. We can use access to these things, which we are likely to give them anyway, as rewards. For example, we can wait until our dog sits and gives us their attention before releasing them to greet a favorite visitor. While not possible in every situation, good training recognizes opportunities to use things our dogs want to reward behavior we like!

ATTENTION & PLAY

Attention includes anything that involves looking at, touching, or talking to your dog. Attention reinforces attention-seeking behaviors, but isn't motivating enough to be the sole reward for most dogs, especially in a world full of things competing for your dog's attention!

Play, on the other hand, is a high-value reward for some dogs. If your dog loves tug or fetch, you can alternate between food and play rewards once your dog has learned a new behavior.

ALL REWARDS ARE NOT EQUAL

When choosing rewards for your dog's training program, remember that *THE DOG CHOOSES THE REWARD*. Our choice of rewards doesn't matter. If your dog doesn't want it, it's not going to produce the results you want.

Also, what your dog finds rewarding is going to change depending on the situation. Your dog may really love when you praise him at home, but be so overwhelmed by the smells and sights at the park (Squirrel!) that your praise and attention has little value, making it an ineffective reward in that environment.

Finally, high levels of stress (including fear and anxiety) cause a dog's digestive system to shut down, decreasing their appetite. So, if your normally "food-motivated" dog stops taking treats in a new environment, it could be an indication that they are uncomfortable in that situation.

REINFORCEMENT CAN WORK FOR YOU...OR AGAINST YOU!

Now that you are aware of the different types of rewards, you can also be aware of what behaviors you might be reinforcing without knowing it.

If you are relaxing and your dog barks to get your attention, and you look at your dog and say "No bark," you just reinforced the barking! You just gave them what they wanted (looking, touching, and talking are all forms of attention); positive reinforcement just worked against you.

Another example is leash training. Every step you take while your dog is pulling on the leash is positive reinforcement for pulling.

The key to making positive reinforcement work for you is to save those rewards for the behaviors you want more of.

RECOMMENDED READING

Don't Shoot the Dog, Karen Pryor

The Power of Positive Dog Training, Pat Miller

DOES PLAYING TUG CAUSE AGGRESSION?

Contrary to popular belief, tug games **do not** cause aggression.

If your dog's body language is loose and happy, it's not an angry growl, it's your dog having a good time!

