

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.

Tips for success:

- **Timing:** The reward must occur immediately so your pet can associate it with the proper action. For example, if you ask your dog to “sit”, reward him the instant his hindquarters hit the ground. If you ask your dog to “sit,” but reward him after he's already standing again, he'll think he's being rewarded for sitting then standing up again.
- **Marker Word:** This can help improve your timing. Choose a word that will let your pet know a reward is coming. Something short like “yes” or “good” works well. The moment your pet does what you want, say your marker word, and then reward her with a treat. This way, your pet understands exactly what she did that caused the reward to follow.
- **Consistency:** Everyone in the family should use the same words to cue your pet. It might be helpful to post these where everyone can become familiar with them. The most commonly used cues for dogs are “sit,” “stay,” “down” (means lie down,) “off” (means put all 4 paws on the floor,) “watch me,” “come,” “let's go” “leave it” and “settle.” Consistency means always rewarding the desired behavior and never inadvertently rewarding undesired behavior.

Positive reinforcement may include treats, praise and petting, picking up the leash, opening a door, going for a walk, a favorite toy, or playing a game. Food treats should be very small, soft, pieces of food so that your pet 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 treats such as hot dogs, cheese, or cooked chicken or beef have all proven successful. Experiment a bit to see what your pet likes the best. You may carry the treats or toy in a pocket or in a treat pouch. Each time you use a reward, you should pair it with verbal praise.

When your pet is learning a new behavior, or if you are working on it in a new environment, he should be rewarded every time he does the behavior (**continuous reinforcement**). It may be necessary to use “**shaping**” with your pet (reinforcing closer and closer approximations to the desired response). 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 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. Use a **variable schedule of reinforcement**, so he doesn't catch on that he only has to respond every other time. Your pet will learn that if 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 treats in your pocket. Your pet will soon be working for your verbal praise, because you have a great relationship and he knows that, occasionally, he'll get a treat or a brief game of catch too! Try asking for a sit before opening doors (helps prevent door-darting), waiting for all four paws on the floor before petting (helps prevent jumping up on people), or asking for a short down-stay before giving your pet his main meals. You can pet or praise your pet for lying quietly by your feet, or slip a treat into his Kong when he's chewing that - instead of on your shoe.

What about when my pet does something wrong?

Think about how you feel when **you** get something wrong. You might not have known you were doing something incorrectly; you may have misunderstood the instructions or interpreted something differently. You may have become frustrated and lost your temper when you didn't get proper direction, or maybe you lost interest because it was something you just couldn't grasp. Isn't it nice to get clear, gentle direction - to be guided towards success and to be rewarded when you get things right?

When training our pets, we avoid physical punishment because it usually involves some level of discomfort or pain. This could lead to your pet not trusting you, or a defensive bite could occur. Physical punishment may also 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 towards that child.

We believe in calm consequences to actions we are trying to extinguish. Removing your dog from the place the undesired behavior occurred (as in a "time-out") can be an effective consequence. Similarly, briefly removing yourself from the situation when your cat is inappropriately seeking your attention can be effective. Not sure what to try? Call us for advice on what's an appropriate and effective way to discourage undesired behavior.

Need help? Call our free pet behavior help line at (503) 416-2983.