

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

Want to teach your dog to wait at the door? Or get your cat to jump into her carrier on her own? You can use positive reinforcement to teach them how to do the right thing.

Positive reinforcement training means that you reward your pet as soon as they do something you like. The reward reinforces the behavior, making it more likely to occur again. Positive reinforcement is a powerful tool you can use to change your pet's behavior. It's also fun and rewarding for you and can help build a lasting bond with your pet.

How to Train:

There are three ways to use positive reinforcement to teach your pet something new:

- **Lure** your pet with food by placing it in front of their nose and moving it in the direction you want them to go.
- **Capture** the behavior by rewarding your pet every time they do the desired behavior on their own.
- **Shape** a behavior by rewarding successive approximations towards the desired behavior.

Do I have to use treats all the time?

Treats are helpful when your pet is learning something new, but you can find other things that are rewarding for your pet too. Once they get the hang of what you're teaching them, you can start varying how often they get a treat or other reward. Continue to praise them every time they do the right thing. 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!

Types of rewards:

- Treats
- Praise
- Play
- Attention
- Opening a door
- Throwing a toy
- Petting
- Putting on a leash
- Going for a walk
- Getting in/out of car

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 (ideally within ½ sec after he sits). 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. Consistency means always rewarding the desired behavior and never inadvertently rewarding undesired behavior. If you want your dog to walk nicely on leash, everyone who walks your dog needs to reward loose-leash walking, not pulling.

How to say “No:”

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 them differently. You may have become frustrated and lost your temper when you didn’t get proper direction. Maybe you lost interest because it was something you just couldn’t grasp. Isn’t it nice to get clear, gentle direction and to be guided towards success? It feels good to be rewarded when you get something right.

Rules, structure and boundaries are still a part of positive reinforcement training. Pets need feedback to understand when we aren’t pleased with their behavior; however, saying “no” in a discouraging tone is not likely to change the behavior. Instead, you can say “no” in a way that your pet will understand. You can:

- **Manage and prevent:** Practiced behavior becomes perfected behavior. Restrict your pet’s access to a place, person, or object that is the center of a problem behavior.
- **Ignore the behavior:** Don’t mistakenly reward unwanted behavior. Pets need consistent feedback. If they get rewarded for the problem behavior, even every once and awhile, the behavior will continue.
- **Redirect:** Think about what you want your pet to do instead of the problem behavior. Train enough appropriate behaviors to redirect them to. For example, if your cat swats at visitors, redirect her by asking her to play with a toy. If your dog is counter surfing, teach him to go lay on a mat while you are cooking in the kitchen.
- **Give your pet a break:** A short “time out” is useful for attention-seeking behavior such as demand barking/meowing, jumping or mouthing for attention. Either leave the room or calmly put your pet in a place where they are comfortable. After 30 seconds, come back and try again.

Force, fear and intimidation have no place in pet training. Physical punishment or “corrections” usually involves some level of unnecessary discomfort or pain. This could cause your pet to become fearful and distrustful towards you – a defensive bite could even occur. Physical punishment could also cause your pet to associate the punishment with other stimuli, including people that are present at the time the punishment occurs. For example, a dog that’s punished for barking at small children may become fearful or aggressive towards children.

If you’re struggling with a problem behavior, we can help! Contact 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.