



Behavior and Training Department Tips and Techniques

Treats and Consequences

Why do people not want to use food in training? People feel it's somehow wrong – that the dog shouldn't need food to do what we want and that in the history of training dogs, food wasn't used. Well, phooey on that.

The Past

For centuries, humans and dogs have cohabited. Probably, most of the time they just had the same goal... to live long enough to reproduce. The most successful were those who did so. At some point, humans began to think of dogs more as tools than as another species sharing the same space. It was natural for dogs to take up certain jobs... herding, flock guards, pulling and hunting dogs.



But, we also required them to be soldiers...war dogs. No one asked the dogs whether they wanted to go to war, and, indeed, trainers had to train the dogs to go against their own instincts - to go through battlefields rather than escape from them. The dogs were trained the same way the humans were trained – if they did NOT do the required behavior, punishment followed. If they DID the required behavior, praise followed.

Many, if not most, of these dogs were given little attention, other than during their training. Kept in kennels (barracks?), they most likely lived for the brief periods when they were taken out and allowed to socialize, albeit in a very structured manner. Thus, the reward of attention was a potent one. Also potent was the punishment for a job not done – swift and effective, with impeccable timing. The reason was simple – if the dogs (and the soldiers) did not respond to commands quickly, and without thinking, they might well be dead. Think of the “commands” we use for dogs – SIT, DOWN, HEEL, STAND, COME. These have a certain resemblance to the “commands” for soldiers, do they not? They should; that's where they originated. Most modern dog training evolved (or devolved) from WWI and WWII – (both Allied and Axis armies).

The dogs we are dealing with and training are not war dogs, whose lack of response to a command should result in a painful correction. We have our dogs as family companions, and as such, I believe we should elicit their cooperation rather than coerce it.

Perhaps a better way of looking at our dogs is as children. It makes sense, since most research indicates that domesticated animals actually retain neonatal – that is, juvenile – features throughout their life. Think of an adult wolf; then think of a pug. What does a pug look like? A child. Youngsters have heads that are round with big eyes. They're actually out of proportion. They are endearing.

Our companion dogs also retain the behavior of puppies into adulthood. In other canid species, the puppies and adults show varied behavior – youngsters are curious, they show exploratory behavior, and approach strange objects with interest. Wild adults are cautious, suspicious and they have an extensive flight distance. Their exploration is slow, because they have learned the consequences of going too close, too fast (think “skunk” or “porcupine”).

It's my view that the best way we can look at dogs is as though they are – at maturity – the mental equivalent to 2 to 2 ½ year old children. Some are mentally a bit older; some are younger. Their motivations are relatively simple. They want food, comfort, company, and they will seek these. They will avoid anything that is distasteful, frightening or painful. They are also very selfish. Sure they love you, but they need you (and they should know it!), and they want stuff from you – all the stuff they require to live. And, they are focused on what they want, and what they don't want, which can make training frustrating (if your dog is focused on a cat when you're trying to teach “down,” you know what I mean).



Behavior and Training Department Tips and Techniques

Food is what is called a “primary reinforcer.” That is, the dog needs food to survive. Therefore, the dog is likely to put himself out to make sure he gets food and stays alive. Toys and balls are not primary, though they can also be potent motivators, when used properly. “Corrections” (punishment) are not usually the best way to get the dog to perform a behavior, though they have their uses for reducing certain behaviors (see below). At any rate, most dogs will work for food quite eagerly.

When to use treats – and when you don’t have to:

Use food:	Food not necessary:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ To train behaviors you want to see repeated▪ To train alternatives to undesired behavior (e.g., training the dog to sit, when she would ordinarily want to jump up)▪ To train against the genetic grain (when the dog’s instinct or desire tells her to do one thing, and you want her to do another)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ To extinguish unwanted or dangerous behaviors, but you can use it to explore alternatives▪ When the environmental reinforcement is more attractive than food (e.g., asking for a “wait” when the dog wants to go outside. Just getting there can be enough reinforcement for the dog.)

Learning Theory and Dog Behavior

There are two stages of training – acquisition and maintenance. During acquisition, the dog is beginning the process of understanding what you want. If you use inducements to help him learn, he will learn faster. If you use punishment, he might do the behavior, but he will become cautious around you, and you may get what we call “behavioral fallout.” Though the dog is doing what you want, the attitude may be depressed (behavioral suppression), or he may lash out at another dog or person (displaced aggression). That’s why we are so insistent on using mostly positive reinforcement.

Now comes the crunch. During acquisition, you should use reinforcement every time you get the behavior. If there are several components to the exercise (a behavior chain), you go for just a little bit at a time (successive approximation). The dog needs to be SURE of what you want. Much of the time, dogs just guess – and sometimes they guess right, and sometimes wrong. Think of trying to ask a Bulgarian who doesn’t speak English where the ladies room is and you’ll get what I mean. You’ll luck out eventually, but you won’t know quite what words or gestures did it! We often think dogs know what we mean because they look so interested, and alert, as though they understand everything we say. They don’t.

Just because you use the treat every time, however, doesn’t mean the dog has to SEE the treat before the behavior. And, that’s where most people screw up. The dog learns that he has to do something when a certain “picture” is in front of him. Trish is standing, treat in hand, saying, “Sit.” If Trish doesn’t have the treat, the picture isn’t complete, and the dog won’t do the behavior. So the biggest Dirty Secret (took a long time to get here, didn’t it!) is that you switch from the OBVIOUS treat to the HIDDEN treat very quickly indeed. Like within 15 to 20 repetitions, if possible.

This seems really easy – why don’t people use it? Couple of things. Mostly, we’re impatient. Dog sits, gets treat. Dog sits, gets treats. Trish hides treat, dog doesn’t sit, Trish gets impatient, brings out treat, picture complete, Dog sits, gets treat. Success!! Trish whines, “Dog will only do sit when he sees a treat.”

So, rule number one: hide the @\$(#@* treat! Quick!



Behavior and Training Department Tips and Techniques

Now your dog has the behavior. Sit perfectly, treat hidden, conditioned reinforcer (Yes-marker word) used every time. Still, this is frustrating. Sit/treat/sit/treat/sit/treat. Where do we go from here? Two places.

1) Twofers. Ask for a sit. Dog sits. Say “yes.” Quickly ask for another sit. Mark and reward. (You just got two behaviors for one reward). This is called variable or random reinforcement. You are asking for more behaviors per reward, as the dog gets better.

As a human example, imagine you were learning to type. In the beginning, your teacher would congratulate you when you could type a rudimentary sentence. However, as you get better, the congratulations would come when you accomplished something more challenging. That’s what we’re doing here. On the other hand, what many people want to do is stop giving treats altogether. We go back to the human example. Say you’re getting paid minimum wage while you’re learning to type. Now, you’ve gotten really good. So your employer says, “Trish you’re darn good at that typing stuff. You’re so good that we’re going to stop paying you!” Don’t know about you, but I’d be gone.... So you never stop paying; the pay just gets different.

2) Adding other behaviors. Now your dog knows Sit and Down. Really well. If you say “sit” she sits... if you say “down” she downs. So, combine them. Sit, down, (treat), sit, down, (treat). And every once in a while sit (treat) down (treat). You can go on with this ad nauseum. Sit, down, come, wait, roll over (treat). If you’re REALLY good, you back chain (which we won’t get to now).

Why don’t people get to this point? One reason is guilt. Guilt is not a good motivator for dogs! It is for people, however. When you tell the dog to do something, and she does it, she looks at you like she’s expecting something. Well, darn it, she is! So, make her do another one. THEN, give her a treat. She’ll be just fine.

Perfection

...is not possible. 100% recall is not possible. 100% sits are not possible. Even those people who brag that their dogs are totally reliable are wrong. You want something that’s 100 % reliable, get a pet rock. Your dog will not be perfect until you are.

If in doubt about whether you are expecting too much from your dog, ask yourself the following questions:

- He s/he capable of doing it physically?
- Have I trained it until the dog is 90% reliable?
- Is the environment one in which I have trained before?

Punishment/Negative Consequences

When do you punish poor behavior? The criteria for punishment is as follows:

1. It has to be the appropriate strength (big - memorable)
2. Timing must be impeccable – the punishment must be attached to the event in the dog’s mind
3. It should come from the environment, not from your hands
4. It must happen every time the misbehavior occurs
5. The dog cannot enjoy the reinforcement so much that he or she will repeat the misbehavior- nor identify the punishment solely with the reinforcement. A good example of this is if a dog jumps up, and every time he does, the owner says, “sit.” The dog sits, and gets a treat. To the dog’s mind jumping up = sit = treat.
6. If it hasn’t worked after 3 to 4 attempts, stop.



Behavior and Training Department Tips and Techniques

The Punishment Paradox

If the punishment is not seen as severe, it will backfire, and you will have to escalate the punishment to be effective or it will never be effective. Thus, a minor punishment for a major crime is often counter-productive. Think, "Choose your battles."

Why do humans want to punish?

Punishment reinforces the punisher. It makes the punisher feel like at least she's done something! Sometimes people use punishment because they are angry or frustrated. Sometimes they use it because other people are standing around, and *they* expect you to punish your dog.

At any rate, over the years, we've found that catching your dog doing something right is much more fun and much more effective than waiting until she does something wrong, and then correcting that.

Trish King
Director, Behavior and Training