

The Reward Experience

Rewards in dog training are a quintessential part of learning. The dog owner has to learn what the dog considers a reward, for it is the recipient that designates what is rewarding and what is not. For the dog, rewards teach the dog what behaviors "pay" and are worth repeating, and which ones don't.

For dogs, rewards can come in many different forms, in many different ways.

- We Reward - food, toys, praise, affection, attention, play, freedom, walks, going outside, etc.
- Dog Self-Rewards - dog chooses behavior that makes him/her feel good (dig, run, chase, chew, etc.)
- Environment Rewards the Dog - food from counter or trash can, wildlife, amazing smell, etc.

It's not just about getting something, for reinforcement is also an emotional experience.

- Anticipation of a reward, or the possibility of one happening
- Observation of the reward - seeing it either us moving or revealing or dog seeing it in the environment
- Delivery of the reward and the behaviors involved to get it
- The reward itself and how much the individual values it

These are factors that need consideration when you are working with your dog.

Have flexibility with rewards. Variety is the spice of life, and so must your rewards.

- Build food drive and continue to use your dog's regular food as much as possible, saving treats for more difficult circumstances.
- Build play-drive with toys and with you, for play and toys brings a different element to your rewards because it can be more exciting, higher in arousal. And this can be very helpful in busier, higher distracting, higher arousal type of situations. You can out-do fun and excitement with some fun and excitement of your own.
- Know your dog and what motivates him/her. Praise? Belly or chest rubs? Scratches behind the ear or collar? Snuggles on the couch? Don't give these out for free if you use them as rewards.
- Use the environment as a reward. Freedom, to choose an activity your dog loves, is a great reward. There are things in the environment that are fun and rewarding to your dog. You need to figure out what. Sniffing, fresh air, sounds of birds, swimming, treeing the squirrel, chasing a leaf blowing in the breeze, and so on, can be rewards provided by the environment. Your gateway for environmental rewards is Premack. Environmental rewards need to be by permission, so your dog doesn't just help himself. The situation can also be very tricky. The environment can reward your dogs when you don't want it to because just seeing something can be reinforcement enough for your dog, even though interaction never occurs. That is why working outside and in public places is a challenge and needs a lot of practice.

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How you deliver the reward matters, too.

- Tossing food or a toy for your dog to chase after it. For dogs that love to chase and run, this can be a better or higher value reward experience than just taking food from the hand.
- Catching the food or toy for dogs that love catching things will be a higher value.
- Delivering the food slowly, calmly, you can influence your dog and help to keep him/her calmer. Placing food on the ground is more relaxed than giving food from the hand or tossing. And slowing your dog down in getting the food, calms your dog down even more.

So, when you are working with your dog, consider your goal: drive, excitement, momentum? Or lower arousal, calmness, or impulse-control. Little details can make a difference for your approach and choices with training.

Everything you do matters when it comes to rewarding your dog. Preparing the food for a training session, if your dog is watching you, is a reward experience. It builds the anticipation of being rewarded. That is why your dog will listen well and follow you if you do this and then train immediately after. The preparation is part of a reward for your dog. And your dog is getting rewarded before he has done anything for you yet. It also includes opening a crackling bag of treats, stuffing your pockets, or filling a treat pouch and attaching it to you. If your dog sees any of this, it is a form of reinforcement.

Additionally, if you reach into your treat pouch or pocket before your dog does the behavior you want, you are also rewarding your dog. If that happens before your dog does the behavior, you can prompt your dog to listen and follow cues only if your hand reaches into the pocket first.

So what happens if your dog does not get this reward experience before working with and for you? Does your dog listen? Does your dog trust that you will offer payment for the work if partial payment, at least, is not received beforehand? These are common problems that people can face. Building trust is important to the relationship. It is best if you let your dog know that even when there is no proof of a reward in the beginning, that listening and following your directions will result in payment and fair compensation for the work completed.

Contrary to what some people believe, dogs don't work for free. "My dog just wants to please me," is not accurate. There has to be something in it for the dog. Unbeknownst to those who think differently and don't offer a reward, they are inadvertently putting the behavior on an extinction schedule. The behavior will go away over time because of the lack of reinforced. How long that will take depends on the dog and the situation. And remember, rewards come in many different forms and from various sources.

So be aware of what you do and who is watching. Prepare food ahead time and get things ready. If your dog catches you doing this, finish what you need to do, and set it aside. Training will happen some point later when your dog has moved on to something else. Notice your

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subtle movements. Don't reach into your pocket or treat pouch until after your dog has done the desired behavior. Your Marker is a bridge and gives you time. What you do to begin rewarding your dog - reaching into your pocket or pouch, walking over to the bowl with food in it, praising your dog - are all part of the reward experience and count. Don't get stingy with your rewards. When you are in the beginning stage of training, and during adolescence, rewards are essential until you build enough trust, a strong relationship. You are the gateway to all things wonderful. That is when a shift takes place, and it is now about "the team." This happens because of all the work and reinforcement you do from the beginning.