

Positive Reinforcement Training? What is that?

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Train your dog using positive reinforcement training methods! Most people who have a dog or work with dogs have heard this but what does it really mean?

Positive reinforcement is animal trainer jargon for a training method that rewards an animal when they do something right. Dog trainers – and for that matter most dog owners – know that when a dog gets a reward for doing a trick the dog is probably going to perform that same trick again. So, slightly more technically, positive reinforcement training increases the likelihood that the dog being trained will repeat the behavior it has just been rewarded for – the behavior is reinforced.

Animal trainers have known for decades that positive reinforcement training helps animals learn faster and more reliably. It is far more powerful to teach an animal what *to do* rather than what *not to do*. You only have to visit the San Diego Zoo, San Diego Wild Animal Park or Sea World to see the evidence. Fortunately for dogs, dog trainers are catching up with their wild animal trainer counterparts and positive reinforcement dog training classes are more widely available than ever.

What about rewards? In order to understand what rewards to use with a dog you have to look at the world through her eyes. The reward must be something she wants – ideally something she will be motivated to work for. If you think you think baked chicken is the bee's knees of food but your dog could care less about it then that particular food is not going to be rewarding to your dog. (I have yet to meet a dog that didn't like baked chicken but it could happen!) If your dog loves a particular toy that you find tattered and maybe a little gross – well, all that matters is that that toy is rewarding to your dog and you can use access to it as a reward while training.

Rewards need to be graded into categories from Strongly Rewarding (your dog will do just about anything to get this reward) to Weakly Rewarding (this reward is pretty ho-hum and your dog might be willing to work for it in an inside environment that is really quiet for something easy to learn.) Food is generally moderately to highly rewarding for most dogs. Kibble is probably going to fit the moderate category and the previously mentioned baked chicken is probably going to be strongly rewarding – but you will have to find out if the dog agrees! Toy motivated dogs often view their toys as more strongly reinforcing than the best food treats. Two examples of weaker rewards are praise and petting. Some dogs will work to hear your happy voice (praise) and others will not. For some dogs, especially dogs with unknown histories like shelter dogs, petting can actually be stressful and scary to them. This is something to be aware of. As much as we humans would love for dogs to learn new and difficult behaviors with praise and petting it just isn't going to happen very quickly. The more motivated the dog the faster and easier she will learn.

Size and texture are two other things to consider when deciding on food rewards. Dogs only need a very tiny amount for a reward. You can use the smallest treat that you are able to handle and deliver with ease. The texture should be soft or at least a texture where it is easy for the dog to swallow without her having to take the time for a long chewing session.



There are volumes written about positive reinforcement training. This article is only a very short overview. Training a dog with positive reinforcement methods is going to result in an increase in behaviors people like; walking with a loose leash, sitting politely, relaxing on a mat when we are busy, enjoying being in a crate to list just a few. I've included a few resources for further reading as well as some ideas for food/treat rewards.

Examples of food treats:

Kibble mixed in zip lock bag with cubed meat**

Plain small kibble**

Cooked pieces of meat (chicken, beef, hot dogs)

Cubed cheese

Natural Balance food roll, cut into small pieces

**This is what I use at the shelter to minimize risk of upset tummies due to diet change.

Reading resources:

Books:

The Power of Positive Dog Training. Pat Miller

The Other End of the Leash. Patricia McConnell

Don't Shoot the Dog. Karen Pryor

The Culture Clash. Jean Donaldson

On Talking Terms with Dogs: Calming Signals 2nd ed. Turid Rugaas

Web Site:

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