

Principles of Positive Training

Training should be an enjoyable experience for both you and your dog. The more you understand about how your dog thinks and learns, the more effectively you can communicate. Clear communication means successful training and good behavior—with no need for coercion or physical corrections.

1. **Behavior that is rewarded is more likely to reoccur.** In other words, dogs do what works for them. If your dog was given praise and a cookie the last time he sat, he is more likely to sit again the next time you ask. If he knows that jumping up on you will earn your attention, he'll keep jumping, as your attention is a reward. This powerful principle is a key component of reward-based training.

2. **Dogs learn by association.** When training, it is important that the reward closely follow the desired behavior. For example, when teaching your dog to sit, the praise and treat should be given when his rear touches the floor, not after he's stood up again. On the other side of the coin, reprimanding your dog for something he may have done hours, or even minutes ago (for example, you come home to find your slippers shredded or potty on the carpet) is pointless; your dog won't associate your yelling with what he's done, and if it happens often enough, he will begin to fear your arrival home, as you're always angry for no reason he can fathom, creating anxiety and mistrust.

3. **Reward behaviors you want, rather than punishing behaviors you don't want.** Most of us are so accustomed to noticing "mistakes" our dogs make that it seems strange to notice and reward "good" behaviors. For example, your dog barks, so you yell at him to be quiet. Sure, a barking dog is hard to ignore. But what about when he's calmly lying down? Most of us never consider rewarding calm, so the dog only gets rewarded with our attention (even yelling is attention) when he is doing something we don't like. Naturally, he keeps doing those things! If, on the other hand, he gets attention for being calm, he will be calm more often. Make it a point to catch and reward your dog for doing something right. If your dog is engaged in a behavior that cannot be ignored (such as chewing the table leg), interrupt with a sharp verbal, "Eh-eh!" then lead him away from the area, ask him to sit, and give him a chew toy or other activity to keep him busy.

4. **Extinction** *If a behavior is ignored, it will eventually extinguish on its own.* Imagine you are trying to buy a soda from a vending machine. You insert your money, press the button, and wait. Nothing happens. You press the button more forcefully, and try a few others as well. Still nothing. You jangle the change lever. No soda, no change. You might even become so angry that you shake or kick the machine. All that effort and still no soda! Grumbling to yourself, you give up and leave. In this example, the soda-seeking behavior extinguished because there was no payoff, no reward. Kicking or shaking the machine is an example of an *extinction burst*. What that means for your dog is that if you ignore an unwanted behavior such as jumping or barking, before your dog gives up, the behavior may actually escalate. The important thing is to wait it out rather than giving in; it will eventually stop, and will stop even sooner the next time around.

5. **Positive reinforcement is something the dog wants.** Just because you think those expensive new treats are a great reward doesn't mean they are. If your dog turns his nose up at them, they're not much of a reward in his mind. A reward can be petting, verbal praise, a throw of the ball, a quick game with a favorite toy, sniffing the grass, or saying hello to another dog. The sky's the limit. Consider which things your dog finds rewarding, and use them.

6. Jackpot! *The jackpot is something really special, head and shoulders above the usual reward.* Your dog can earn this amazing prize by doing something especially wonderful. While it's always important to use training treats your dog likes, save the Super-Yummy, Best-Thing-In-The-World as a jackpot. Here's an example of how to use the jackpot: In teaching Sit, your dog obviously understands what is expected, but doesn't sit very quickly. When you give the sit cue, he watches for a moment, then languidly lowers his butt to the floor. You can almost hear him sigh, "Oh, okay, if I must." However, on the fourth repetition, he responds immediately; butt hits floor in record time. Jackpot! You immediately give him a few pieces of the jackpot treat one after another, along with effusive verbal praise. (You can also give a jackpot by tossing a shower of the usual treat.) Jackpoting makes an impression. It calls your dog's attention to the fact that he's done something really great. He is therefore more likely to perform the behavior better than usual the next time. A jackpot doesn't have to be food, either. If your dog lives for a toss of the ball, use that as your jackpot. Know your dog and use what works for him.

7. Find an alternate behavior. When you want your dog to stop doing something, give him something else to do instead—that is, something that is incompatible with the behavior you don't want. For example, if your dog jumps up on you, have him sit instead; he can't sit and jump at the same time. Does he chew on furniture? Give him an appropriate chew toy instead; he can't chew items on both at once. Try this: Take a piece of paper, and draw a line vertically down the center. On the left side, list all the things your dog does that you'd like him to stop doing. On the right, next to each behavior, write down a behavior he could do instead. Once you start thinking about things in this way, you'll be surprised at the creative solutions you come up with—and how needless punishment really is.

8. Raise criteria gradually in small increments, building upon each success. Simply put, that means *don't expect too much too soon*. Build small steps to get from Point A to Point B. For example, when teaching your dog to stay, start with a three-second stay. If successful, try for a stay that is two seconds longer. If the five-second stay is too much (your dog breaks the stay), don't correct him. You've asked for too much too soon. Simply go back to three seconds and start again, then build slowly, one second at a time. Any time your dog does not perform an exercise correctly, ask yourself if you have raised the criteria too quickly. Go back to the point at which your dog was last successful, then build gradually. Raising criteria gradually eliminates the need for correction by setting your dog up to succeed.

9. If trained correctly, behavior is not contingent on food being present. This is something that many people who are opposed to food-reward training don't understand. If you phase treats out gradually and begin to substitute lots of real-life rewards (like petting, games, the door opening for a walk), your dog will perform the desired behaviors even when you don't have food with you. We use plenty of treats at first to teach and practice new behaviors. Eventually, a schedule of random (unpredictable) reinforcement, along with real-life rewards, will ensure that the good behavior continues. You wouldn't want to stop getting paid once you got better at your job, so don't forget to reward your dog sometimes for a job well done!

10. Training should be fun!

- Keep training sessions short; three to five sessions of three to five minutes a day is fine.
- Focus on one new behavior per session.
- Keep an upbeat attitude when training. Don't train when you're cranky!
- End each training session on a successful note. Did your dog just do eight good sits, with the last one being really great? End the session there.
- As each behavior is learned, incorporate it into your daily routine as often as possible.

Above all, BE KIND TO YOUR DOG AND HAVE FUN!