

Down Dog Digest

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Main feature: Why rewards are so important when training dogs
Education features: The art of giving treats. Luring or bribing?
Carol's Challenge: Find out what your dog loves best

The importance of rewards

Why, what, when, how

"Yes! Good boy, Gus," I praised as I gave my dog a piece of his favourite chicken.

I'd been teaching him to stand from a sit and he'd just done it perfectly. I needed to tell and show him how great that response was and my praise then chicken did the trick.



Why reward?

Have you heard someone say "But surely your dog should obey you anyway because you are the pack leader?" Hmm. Let's talk about why this is outdated (and wrong).

Imagine you go to work tomorrow and your boss says "I need you to do this job for me by tonight. But I'm not paying you today." If you enjoyed your job and liked your boss you might do the task that day. I'd be pretty certain that you wouldn't do it day after day though. And if you didn't like your job or your boss much, you probably wouldn't even do it the first day.

Giving your dog a reward for doing something you ask is equivalent to paying him for doing that job.

It's the right thing to do. There are innumerable studies now to confirm that dogs who are trained using rewards are happier, more enthusiastic and learn quicker.

What rewards should you use?

For most training and for most dogs, food is an easy and great reward to use. You can also use toys, petting, or the ability to do something the dog wants, such as go into the garden, have a car journey, or get attention from their favourite person.

Rewards are whatever your dog likes.

Commonly, we see owners "rewarding" their dogs by patting or ruffling them around their head — and we watch as the dog ducks down, moves or turns away. For those dogs, that type of touch is not a reward — because they don't like it.

Food is the best reward most of the time because it's easy to use, easy to carry and most dogs like it. Use your dog's own food with other yummy stuff mixed in as necessary for harder or more difficult tasks, or just as random special rewards.

When I train at home I use dry kibble. Training in class, I use kibble mixed with some nice dog treats and occasional bits of cheese or chicken or whatever. I'll also use high value treats when I'm training in the most difficult environments, or in situations Gus finds difficult or challenging.

For example, when I take Gus to the vets he gets cheese, or ham, or chicken - chicken is his current favourite.

The importance of rewards

Different dogs will prefer different things as rewards. There are five types of reward:

- Food
- Toy play
- Petting
- Attention from a favourite person
- Access to a favourite place or activity

Your job is to find out what your dog wants most. My Challenge this month is all about working out what your dog's favourite rewards are.



When to reward?

It's important that rewards are given as soon as possible after the dog performs the correct response. Rewards have to be linked closely in time to the wanted action the dog does. For example, when first teaching a sit, you aim to reward as soon as the dog's bottom hits the floor. When teaching a sit-stay you can use your voice to praise the action and encourage it to continue then give a treat at the end of the exercise. Great trainers will usually reward within ½ second, owners should aim for 1-2 seconds. Practice makes perfect!

There are several different patterns of giving rewards. When you first start teaching your dog something you should give a reward after every correct response. This provides quick learning but there is a danger that the action will become food-dependent if this practice is continued for too long – "He'll only do it if I'm holding a treat."

Skinner did some remarkable experiments

rewarding rats pressing levers, and he accidentally discovered some vital information about giving rewards - that if rewards are given intermittently, the behaviour becomes more firmly embedded.

Giving a reward every time helps teach the wanted response, but intermittent rewards are best to cement and embed behaviour.

Humans use intermittent rewards frequently in everyday life. The entire world's work force is maintained on fixed schedules, where the reward is delivered either after a set number of trials, or after a set period of time. The former is piece-work, the latter provides a monthly paycheck.

This doesn't work well for dogs – if you only reward every third sit, for example, you'll end up rewarding a mix of good and poor responses. If you reward every ten seconds you won't always catch the behaviour you want.

In dog training, the most effective training is when you reward only the best responses. Aim to reward the best third – the quickest sits, the best attention giving, or the steadiest waits.

So when should you stop giving a reward every time? Use the 19 out of 20 rule – once the dog responds quickly, first time of asking, 19 times out of 20, it's time to start to reward only the best responses.

How to reward

A reward is not simply giving the dog their food or toy. *How* you give it is important. Do you throw your toy or play tug? Do you give the dog the food treat or drop it on the ground? How (and where) it's best to give the reward depends on what you're rewarding.

For example, when teaching a sit, give a treat from your hand directly to your dog's mouth. Reward a down by dropping the treat between your dog's front paws. If your dog is working at a distance from you, throwing a toy to your dog or over their head is the answer. Reward right beside your leg when training a dog to walk by your side on a loose lead.

Reward your dog - and reward well!

The art of giving treats

Does your dog grab at treats, leading to painfully nipped fingers?

This can be a vicious cycle: your dog grabs at the treat, your fingers are nipped, so next time you try to move your hand away as soon as the dog goes to take the treat.

But this makes your dog grab more, which makes you pull away even more quickly, which makes your dog snap and grab...and so on.

Here are two options to help:

1) Give your dog the treat from a flat palm - this is the best method for children to give treats to dogs. Like giving a treat to a horse. Most children enjoy it, too, and giggle at the feel of that velvety nose on their palm.

2) This second method sounds odd, but it works brilliantly.

As your dog moves towards the treat to grab it

from your fingers, push your fingers with the treat into your dogs mouth as if trying to put the treat on the back of their tongue.

It works. Try it!



Luring or bribing?

Luring can help teach your dog what to do by using a treat to help your dog do what you want. It's the quickest and easiest way to teach many things.

For example, holding a treat up above the dog's nose will cause them to drop their bottom to the floor; you add the cue "sit" and give the treat. You have just lured the behaviour you want.



But it's vital to drop the lure as soon as possible, usually after around 3-5 successful attempts.

Otherwise the dog might decide that the treat held out is an integral part of sitting and they may well not sit unless the treat is there.

If used for too long, luring quickly becomes bribing. Perhaps your dog won't walk by your leg unless you hold a treat there. Or they won't come in from the garden unless you rattle the treat tin. Or come back to you unless you're waving a treat. Or do what you ask unless you have a treat bag on you, or treats in your pocket. And so on.

Bribing puts the dog in control.

It's much better to turn your dog into a gambler by giving surprise rewards, or only giving rewards sometimes, for the best responses, so the dog is never sure when they will get their reward - which keeps them trying hard!

Carol's Challenge

Each month I'm going to set you a challenge.

This month your challenge, should you wish to accept it, is: to work out what rewards your dog loves.

We've got a reward audit booklet to help you which you'll receive when you sign up on the home page of our website, downdog.co.uk

It tells you about the five different types of rewards you can give your dog:

- Food
- Toy play
- Petting (touch)
- Attention from a favourite person, and
- Access to fun places or activities



It's important to find out what your dog loves, because it's no good offering your dog chicken if they'd rather play tug. And it's no good giving your dog a cuddle if they'd prefer to go out into the garden for a run around.

Different dogs prefer different things. For example, dogs who don't like food much might find toy play is a great alternative reward.

Do you pat your dog on the head to tell them they've been good? Hmm. Many dogs hate being patted on the head. I have an uncle who, when I was little, used to ruffle my hair. I hated it, and it made me dread him coming to visit.

Gus loves being rubbed on his bottom or ruffled under his neck. These are his favourite ways of being touched. He'll push into my hands for more of either of these touches, but he'll pull away from being patted on his head.

Perhaps your dog loves a particular person, so being allowed to greet them is a great reward. Gus loves my mum and being allowed to say hello to her is a fabulous reward for him.

Or perhaps your dog's favourite reward is to go for a drive in the car, or visit the beach, or being allowed on the sofa, or play hide and seek.

Use our reward audit booklet to work out what your dog loves most.

Then use that knowledge to help you train your dog easily and quickly - and check out the website for ways we can help you.

We hope you've enjoyed this Down Dog Digest.

Please feel free to share it with any friends, neighbours or family members you think might find it interesting.

To get more information, tips, and advice about owning, training, caring for and enjoying your dog more, become a Down Dog Devotee. You'll get these regular newsletters sent to your home. You'll also get access to our huge range of training tips, videos, information sheets, webinars and podcasts as well as access to our Discussion Forum where you can ask any doggy related questions you need answers to. You get big discounts off all of our online and in-person classes too.

Go to the website, www.downdog.co.uk, to find out more.