

Training & Behavior

Discover how to teach the training basics.

By Liz Palika

Have you noticed that your dog always comes running when you open the crinkly bag of dog treats or when the dog food rattles in the bottom of its bowl? Food is a big motivator for most dogs -- after all, it meant survival to your dog's distant ancestors. You can use this motivation in your dog's training, and by doing so, your dog will be an eager participant.

For many years, training with treats had not always been considered acceptable to most dog trainers or dog owners. The most common complaint was, I want my dog to work for me, not for food! However, in the 70s and 80s, a few dog trainers, including myself, began experimenting with treats in training. We found that when treats were used in the training process, not only did the dogs pay more attention, but they seemed to learn faster, with a higher rate of retention. As a very real and positive side effect, fewer corrections were needed during the training.

Today, training with treats is an accepted and widely used method of dog training. The exact techniques vary, with each trainer developing his or her own method. In general, though, most use treats as both a lure (to help the dog perform on command) and as a positive reinforcement (to reward the dog for performing on command).

The Training Process

Teaching your dog is not a difficult project, although at times it may seem to be nearly impossible. Most dogs want to be good; they just need to learn what you want them to do and what you don't. Therefore, most of the teaching process consists of communication. You need to reward the behaviors that you want your dog to continue doing and interrupt the behaviors you wish to stop. Rewards (or positive reinforcements) can be treats or toys accompanied by verbal praise and petting. You can interrupt bad behaviors by using the leash to stop or restrain your dog, putting your hands on your dog to stop the behavior (by grabbing the collar, for example) or by using a deeper than normal tone of voice.

For example, teaching your dog to sit will prevent your dog from jumping up on people. When guests come to the house, put the leash on your dog and tell it to sit. When your dog sits, praise it in a higher than normal tone of voice and give it a treat. If it should try to jump up on your guests, use the leash to restrain your dog, tell it, No jump! in a deeper tone of voice and have your dog sit again.

Did you notice the emphasis on two different tones of voice? As verbal animals themselves, dogs are very aware of different voice tones. When the leader of a wolf pack lets a subordinate know that it has made a mistake, the leader emits a deep growl to convey that message. When everything is fine and the pack has hunted, the leader may convey this with higher pitched barks or even yelps. When you copy this technique, use a deep growling voice to let the dog know it has made a mistake and a higher pitched tone of voice to reinforce good behavior. Your dog doesn't have to stop and translate this information: it understands instinctively. Don't confuse high and low tones of voice with volume, though. Your dog can hear very well -- much better than you can -- therefore it is not necessary to yell. Instead, simply make yourself sound like you mean business.

Don't rely on just corrections (verbal or otherwise) to train your dog. Dogs and people alike learn more from our successes than we do from our mistakes, and we are more likely to repeat our successes. Don't hesitate to set your dog up for a success to give you the opportunity to praise and reward it. If you want to make sure it doesn't jump on people, for example, have your dog sit before people approach to pet it. Reward your dog for sitting with praise and a treat. If your dog then makes a mistake and jumps up, you can let it know this is a mistake, but have it sit again so that you can reward this behavior.

Basic Obedience Commands

The basic obedience exercises will help your dog become a better canine citizen -- both at home and in public. The basic exercises are also very important when changing problem behaviors. In addition, these commands are the foundation for everything else you may want to teach your dog.

Sit: The sit exercise teaches your dog to assume the sitting position and hold still until released from the position. When your dog sits, it isn't jumping up on people, and it is easier to feed your dog without it knocking the bowl out of your hands. Having your dog sit also makes it easier to get its attention -- an important lesson in self-control.

Put your dog on a leash, holding the leash in one hand. Shorten it so that your dog is within two feet of you. Have a pocketful of treats within reach of the hand not holding the leash. In this exercise, you will use a treat as a lure. With your dog standing in front of you, have a treat in hand and command your dog, "Fido, sit!" as you take a treat and hold it above your dog's nose. Slowly move your hand back toward your dog's tail, over its head. As your dog's head goes up to follow the treat, its hips will go down. As your dog sits, be enthusiastic with your praise, "Good boy to sit!" At the same time, pop that treat in its mouth. Practice this two or three times and then quit, giving your dog a break, tossing a toy or rubbing your dog's tummy. Then practice it again two or three more times.

Release: The release lets your dog know when the command is completed. For example, the beginning of the sit exercise is when you tell your dog, Fido, sit! The end of the exercise is when you pat your dog on the shoulder and say, "Fido, release!" As you begin training, you can use the leash to encourage your dog to get up from the sitting position after you give it the release command.

The release command is also a release from pressure. Your dog, especially if it is trying hard to please you, will feel some emotional stress during training. When you give your dog the release from a command, pet, rub and massage it. Use your voice to tell your dog that you're pleased. This release doesn't have to be long -- a few seconds is fine, just long enough to let your dog know you are happy.

Down: When combined with the stay command (which will be taught next), the down teaches your dog to be still for gradually increased periods of time. Your dog will be able to lie down and stay while people are eating, so there is no begging under the table. You can have it lie down at your feet while you're watching television in the evening; or you can have it stay quietly while guests are visiting. The down/stay is a very useful command.