



How To Teach Dogs

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Dogs do what works for them. This simple idea is the key to successful training. There are two general ways different kinds of trainers use this idea to train.

1. **Create a pleasant situation the dog will work to repeat.**
 - Follow behavior you want to see more of with treats, toys, attention, scratches behind the ears, car rides, walks, or whatever your dog likes!
2. **Create an unpleasant situation the dog will work to escape from.**
 - One example: Tighten a slip-collar around the dog's neck then when the dog does what you want, release it.

Method 2 is harder to use effectively, and mistakes are harder to repair. Some dogs become fearful or aggressive. Others learn to run the other way when the training gear comes out. Even when it seems to work, the dogs exhibit a lot of stress behaviors such as heavy panting, drooling, furrowing the brows, etc.^{1,2} Method 1 is easier and far more forgiving. Method 1 is the method used by the top animal trainers in the world with a huge array of species ranging from dogs and house cats to killer whales, walrus and elephants!³

Positive Reinforcement

Positive reinforcement is a powerful training principle. By following a behavior you want to see more of with something the dog likes, you can train any behavior the animal is capable of performing.

It's Simple Math. In behavior lingo, positive means something added. Positive reinforcement means that something a dog will work to get (called a reinforcer) is added or given following a certain behavior.

1. In a certain situation (Such as when you say "sit"),
2. The dog performs a behavior (He sits),
3. And immediately receives something he likes (a treat). (A treat is added to the situation.
4. In the future when the same situation occurs, the dog will be more likely to do that behavior. (When Fido hears "sit" he is more likely to "sit" in hopes of receiving another treat.)

¹ Renowned animal trainer Bob Bailey began training marine animals for the military in the 1950s and over a 50 plus year career trained over 120 species and many thousands of individual animals for TV, movies, fairs, military uses, assistance animal work and more. When he was asked about his thoughts on the use of punishment in training animals he said, "I would have used punishment if it had worked better, but it didn't work better." His method of choice? Method 1.

² Stress symptoms caused by the use of electric training collars on dogs (*Canis familiaris*) in everyday life situations. Current Issues and Research in Veterinary Behavioral Medicine, Papers presented at the 5th Int'l IVBM. Purdue University Press, 2005:139-145. [ISBN 987-1-55752-409-5; 1-558753-409- 8

³ Schilder MBH, van der Borg JAM. Training dogs with the help of the shock collar: short and long term behavioural effects. Applied Animal Behaviour Science 2003;85:319-334



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The basic rules for positive reinforcement are:

1. **Make it worthwhile.** If the dog doesn't want it in that situation, or if he doesn't like it, he won't work for it. It doesn't matter if you think he should work for it.
2. **Work when he's "hungry".** If the dog has just eaten a big meal he's less likely to work for treats. If he has a dozen rope toys, he's less likely to work for the chance to play with a rope toy. Don't feed Fido for at least a couple of hours before training sessions, and keep his favorite toys in your training bag for use only in training.
3. **Be quick!** The reinforcer must be delivered immediately after the behavior happens, even while it is still happening if possible. Even a delay of 2 seconds can cause the dog's performance to falter. (There's a trick to make this easier below!)
4. **If and Only If.** Never deliver a reinforcer unless the dog did the behavior you asked for and nothing but the behavior you asked for.
5. **Bite Sized Pieces.** If your dog has never turned in a circle on cue before, you will have to wait a long time for him to do it on his own. First reinforce turning his head. Gradually wait for him to do more and more.
6. **Be generous.** The best trainers give a lot of reinforcers. If your dog isn't doing something worth reinforcing, your criterion are too high. Rethink #5 and try again.

Quick! Click!

It can be difficult to get a treat into a dog's mouth right after he does a behavior when a dog is sitting right in front of you, much less when he is doing complicated behaviors at a distance such as the weave poles on an agility field. An easy solution is to use a clicker to mark the behavior you want to reinforce. Clickers are sold in several designs, but the most common one is a small plastic rectangular box that contains a strip of metal that, when depressed, makes a clicking sound. By teaching a dog that every time he hears a click he will always receive a treat or something else he likes a lot, you can get your dog to perform behaviors even when you can't immediately put a treat in his mouth.

The key to success with a clicker is to only click it when you plan to deliver a treat. Make sure the kids know it isn't a toy, it's a training tool. If you click the clicker, deliver the treat, even if you make a mistake and click at the wrong time. It's your mistake, not his! You'll be able to quickly undo any confusion you create. Every clicker trainer mis-clicks once in a while.

The clicker is only used when a dog is first learning a new skill. Once he is consistently responding to your cue (which Method 2 trainers call a command) you can stop using the clicker and simply deliver a treat.

Cues instead of Commands

You may have noticed my use of the word "cue" instead of the more familiar word, "Command". Positive reinforcement trainers usually use the term "cue" because it indicates that a treat is available, not that anything bad will happen if he doesn't obey.

Misbehavior? Learn the Motivation!

Positive reinforcement trainers try to avoid using punishment to get rid of undesirable behaviors. Instead they look for the motivation for the problem behavior and think of a way to change the environment so that something more desirable is more motivating. As stated earlier, dogs are always working to get some worthwhile outcome. Jumping on Aunt Susie is often motivated by a desire for attention. Counter surfing (eating food off the kitchen counters) is motivated by the food that is left there. Digging may be motivated by boredom or a love of tasty grub worms.

⁴ It is believed that successful professional trainers give on average 20 treats per minute while novice trainers deliver only 6.



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Figure out whether there is another behavior you can train your dog to do to replace whatever she is doing now, or whether managing the environment so that he will have no choice but to do something different is a better solution. Sometimes we can teach an alternative behavior to fit a certain situation. For example, you can teach Fido that if he sits when he sees Aunt Susie she will pet him but if he jumps on her she will ignore him

Other times it's easier to simply change the environment to change the behavior. For example, if Fido digs in the trash, put the trash behind a closed door. If he counter surfs, clean all food off the countertops before leaving the room. The fact is that any rule you make will be less effective if you are not home to enforce it, so your best bet is to simply manage the environment in some situations.

Have fun!

Training your dog should be fun for both of you. Your dog doesn't have fun if he's always having to worry about what misstep or failure will get him in trouble. You don't have any fun if you have to be gruff with your dog and work for long training sessions every day.

A key to a successful clicker training session is to quit when everyone is still having fun. Instead of working for an hour or even a half hour, no matter what, work until your dog does something very well, then quit. Sometimes your training sessions will only be 5 minutes long! It can actually be hard to quit when he just did something beautifully, but if you do, you and your dog will be eager for the next training time to come around. If you work until it's not fun any more, you'll find that neither you nor your dog is very happy about keeping it up.

The good news is that with positive reinforcement your dog will remember what you've learned even with very short sessions. Traditional training methods recommend that you not start training puppies until they are 6 months old, but with positive reinforcement you can start even before their eyes open if you want to! Can you teach old dogs new tricks? You bet you can! Even old dogs love clicker training. What about stubborn breeds? It turns out they're only stubborn with Method 2! They are eager learners with positive reinforcement!