

Genius Dog Newsletter

GENIUS DOG TRAINING

"Dogs are not our whole life, but they make our lives whole." Roger Caras

What is Reward-Based Training?

By Carmela L. Lutz, CPDT-KA

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If you took a psychology course in college you might remember learning about an American Psychologist B.F. Skinner and his lifelong study of operant conditioning and its application to human and animal behavior. One of the consequences that shape behavior in dog training is positive reinforcement.



Simply put, positive reinforcement uses treats, toys, and/or praise to reward your dog for doing something you want him to do. Because rewarding your dog increases the likelihood that he (or she) will repeat the behavior in the future, positive reinforcement is one of your most powerful tools for shaping or changing your dog's behavior.

Before you begin, consider what type of reward works best with your dog. All dogs are food motivated to some degree, so treats usually work well. However, when using treats remember to use something your dog likes...a lot!

I also prefer using small bite-size treats, or treats that can be easily broken or torn apart into small pieces without crumbling. For training purposes, you don't want to give your dog large

treats, like a pig ear or Milk-Bone biscuit that will fill them up and/or take too long for them to consume.

You might also consider selecting at least two or three different treats. Remember, too much of a good thing might not be very motivating after a while. That's one reason why I like using Bravo! Training Treats Trail Mix; it contains freeze-dried all-beef hot dogs, buffalo meat, turkey meat, and Vermont cheddar cheese all in one bag.

For those of you who have dogs that don't seem to be very food motivated, I offer two suggestions: train when your dog is more likely to be hungry and try a variety of treats. In most cases, you'll be able to find something your dog will like.

You can also try using a toy as a reward. Of my two dogs, Wylie is more motivated by a squeaky tennis ball than treats. To make it fun for both of us, I incorporate our training sessions with playing fetch. I have Wylie do a behavior (sit, down, spin, bow, etc.) then I throw the ball. Not only do we get to do some training, but Wylie gets his exercise at the same time.

Finally, praise, both verbal and physical, can be motivating for a lot of dogs. However, praise alone may not be enough. Keep in mind, dogs don't

understand human language and some dogs may not like being touched or petted a lot.

Whichever type of reward you decide to use keep in mind that timing is everything in training. You need to give the reward immediately after the behavior has been done; waiting too long (even a few seconds) or giving it too early may throw off your training.

When you begin training your dog to do a new behavior you should give your dog a reward every time he (or she) does the behavior correctly (continuous schedule of reinforcement). However, once your dog is consistently doing the behavior correctly you need to vary when you give your dog a reward (variable-ratio schedule of reinforcement).

Variable-ratio schedules occur when a response is reinforced after an unpredictable number of responses (i.e., think of a slot machine). This schedule creates a high steady rate of responding. If you don't believe me, just go to a local casino and see for yourself.



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We're on the Web!

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FALL TRAINING SPECIALS

All clients (San Diego & Riverside County) receive **15% off** private, in-home or in-store training during the months of September, October, and November. This doesn't happen very often, so take advantage of the savings now!

ONLINE STORE SPECIALS & ANNOUNCEMENTS

We are offering **10% off** our entire stock of toys through November 30, 2014.

New products are coming soon. Check our online store for some great deals.

Genius Dog Training's Online Store is available to our clients, previous clients, and newsletter subscribers. Check out some of our great pet products.

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Here are a few helpful hints:

When you start rewarding using a variable-ratio schedule, try rewarding your dog when he performs at his best; this will sharpen his skills even more.

If you are concerned about giving your dog too many treats, you can try mixing some kibble into your treat bag.

Keep your training sessions brief; only 2 – 5 minutes a session, several times a day. This will keep you and your dog from getting bored and/or frustrated.



Incorporate your training routine into your daily life. When you take your dog for a walk, have him sit before you cross the street or lie down and stay when you check your mail box.



Not only is this great for time management, but it takes your training into the "real world" ...where it counts the most.

If used correctly, reward-based training can be a very effective way to train your dog while also building a positive relationship between the two of you. This method of training has fewer, if

any, negative consequences versus discipline-based methods which tend to use some form of punishment (e.g., leash jerk, scolding, etc.) to change behavior.

If you would like to learn more about reward-based training, you can read an article entitled "Reward Training vs. Discipline-Based Dog Training" that was published on December 28, 2010 by Stanley Coren, Ph.D., F.R.S.C. in Canine Corner (Psychology Today).



"Wylie's Corner" will return in our next edition.