

## Using rewards

At around the time we took home our new puppy, almost 13 years ago, I bought a book on dog trick training which advocated the use of food rewards. The puppy learned all manner of amazing and amusing tricks, and always performed them with immense enthusiasm. To this day she will still insist on carrying the car keys, even though she hasn't been rewarded for doing this for a decade!

When she was two years old I decided that we were smart enough to attempt some competitive obedience. We duly joined a training club where it was immediately made clear that Food was Vorboten. It didn't take a genius to see the difference it made to this dog's attitude, who obviously regarded obedience training as death-on-four-legs while she still remained extremely keen to learn tricks. So I re-introduced food into the training schedule, and we sailed up the competitive ranks.

If your dog has a different attitude to "work" and "play", you could be on the wrong track, especially if you're looking for a fast, keen agility dog. The best results are going to come from dogs that regard every training session as playtime!

I find that when discussing with handlers the use of rewards in dog training, the same questions and concerns are often raised. Here are my usual answers:

*I want my dog to work for me, not for food.*

Actually my only answer to this is really, would YOU work your butt off for your boss just because he wanted you to? Or might you be more motivated by a bonus cheque at the end of the job, or a fat raise when you did really good work? Of course there are dogs who will work for praise alone, but I've only met one or two genuine cases in the last 10 years ...

*I don't want to use food because my dog will get fat.*

We certainly don't want to be encouraging our agility dogs to gain weight – if you use food in training, compensate by feeding the dog less at mealtimes. Make sure the treats you use are very small and very tasty. Even big dogs will be happy with a morsel of chicken or a sliver of cheese.

*My dog isn't interested in food or toys.*

If this dogs sounds like yours, you have a little more work ahead of you. Dogs **can** be taught to play, and almost every dog will love tugging on a rope or toy if taught patiently. Start by putting some very tasty strong-smelling treats in an old sock. Show it to the dog. As soon as the dog shows some interest in the sock, take out a treat for the dog. Present the sock to the dog again, and wait for the dog to try harder to get to the treat – reward the dog for any licking, nibbling or biting of the sock. As the dog gets bolder and keener to get to the treat, encourage him to pull the sock out of your hand. Gradually

increase your resistance to the sock being pulled. This could take a few days or a few weeks, but keep working at it. Eventually you will be able to dispense with the food in the sock altogether.

Most dogs are turned on by *something*, so study your dog carefully to see what rewards you could possibly use in your training. A dog can also be taught to be a lot more interested in food treats by asking it to perform small tasks for food when it's still a puppy. If all else fails, feed the dog less at mealtimes – a hungrier dog is more likely to want a treat.

*My dog is fixated on food/toys and is impossible if the food/toy is around.*

If your dog is crazy about food or toys, please get up and do a little jig around your chair, for you are blessed indeed! In fact, the crazier your dog is for its reward, the more you are going to be able to get your dog to do for you. It's a simple contract: "I have your ball/liver treat, and you can have it as soon as you do this small task for me."

Admittedly it can be frustrating when the dog only has eyes for the reward, but with good training this is just a brief phase in the process and the dog will soon learn that *leaving* the reward is the only way to *get* the reward (which is referred to, in some quarters, as Doggy Zen).

This is where I suggest learning about clicker training – but more on this another time.

*My dog loves jumping anyway. Why do I need to use a reward?*

A common mistake – the handler thinks that the dog is already having fun, so a reward is unnecessary. Think about this example:

The dog is asked to jump through the tyre jump. The dog chooses instead to jump through the frame and not through the tyre. The handler goes "Oh dear", and doesn't throw the dog's ball. (Withholding a reward is a very mild but very effective type of punishment.) The dog says "Oh dear" and when asked to jump again, makes sure to go through the tyre so that he can get his ball. Now, if you weren't using a reward, how would you let the dog know that he hadn't got it right? You could ask him to do it again, which might or might not teach him anything, or you would have to punish the dog. Now, in a sport where we are wanting the dogs to be brimming with enthusiasm and confidence and not scared of making mistakes, punishment is a Very Bad Idea.

Another example – a dog that loves the tunnel/weaves/contacts will often self-reward itself by shooting off-course and indulging itself with its favourite obstacle. There's not a lot you can do about a self-rewarding dog other than employing punishment (see above). It's a much better idea to have the dog focused on a reward that is not part of the course, and which you can control.

*Sally Adam*