

Training with Food

You will use food rewards as reinforcers for training your dog. The following points will help you use food rewards appropriately to get positive training results.

Types of Food Rewards:

Your dog must like the food you choose to use as a reward. You will need to use a variety of food rewards. You should experiment to see which types of foods really motivate your dog and which foods barely interest him. Refer to the “Positive Reinforcers” handout for ideas about different food rewards.

High Value versus Low Value Food Rewards:

Use highly motivating, high value food rewards when the training task is difficult and your dog needs extra encouragement. Lower value food can be used when the training is easier. For example, your dog may work for his regular kibble while training a Sit in the quiet of your living room. However, if you train a Sit in the front yard while your neighbor’s cat walks by, a juicy piece of steak might be better to motivate your dog.

Soft Food Rewards:

The food rewards should be soft and easily chewed. Hard crunchy food takes too long to eat and slows the pace of training. Additionally, dogs tend to choke on and cough up hard food.

Size of Rewards:

Training involves many repetitions with a food reward after each repetition. The food rewards should be cut into small pea sized pieces so your dog will not get full too quickly. Small pieces also mean there is no worry of your dog getting fat from the training.

Using Your Dog’s Regular Food as Rewards:

You may use your dog’s regular food as training rewards. If you choose to do so, reserve a portion of the food normally fed to your dog at mealtime. If your dog usually eats three cups a day, set aside one cup of food for training. At his next mealtime, feed your dog the remaining two cups and anything left over from training. In this way, your dog will get his normal amount of food.

Hungry Dog:

Your dog needs to be somewhat hungry for a training session. You will get a much better response from a hungry dog. Therefore, it is not a good idea to train your dog after he has eaten. Train before you feed your dog’s meal or wait a few hours after your dog has eaten. Do not feed your dog right before class.

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Keep a Full Bowl of Rewards:

Each training session should include a full container of food rewards. Show them to your dog. Set them on a table where your dog can see them but cannot reach them. Your dog may not get all of these rewards, but the sight and smell of them will motivate your dog to work.

Bring a full bowl of rewards to class. Your dog will be disappointed if he is working hard in class and you run out of rewards.

Access to Rewards:

You should have easy access to the rewards but your dog should not. The container of rewards should have a tight fitting lid or the container should not be accessible to your dog. The container should be non-breakable. The container could be a plastic bowl with a lid or it could be a sandwich bag. You can set the container on a counter to keep it out of reach from your dog.

Carrying Rewards:

At certain times while training you will be moving and you will need to carry rewards. It is helpful to put the rewards in a fanny pack or pocket so your hands are free. Bait or treat bags are very useful. They attach around your waist with a strap or clip to your belt. They also close to keep treats from spilling out.