



Positive Reinforcement

Positive reinforcement is one of the most powerful tools for shaping or changing your pet's behavior. Positive reinforcement is the presentation of something pleasant or rewarding immediately following a behavior, making that behavior more likely to occur in the future.

Correct timing is essential when using positive reinforcement. The reward must occur immediately, or your pet may not associate it with the proper action. For example, if you have your dog "sit", but reward him after he's already stood up again, he may think he's being rewarded for standing up.

Consistency is also essential. Everyone in the family should use the same cues. It might be helpful to post these where everyone can become familiar with them. When coming up with cues, think about your body language and what words you'd like to use. When teaching sit, you may want to raise your hand up with a flat palm, bending at the elbow and say the word "sit". Whatever you choose, make sure everyone is on board! Always be sure to reward the behavior you like and ignore the behavior you do not like.

Rewards! For your pet, positive reinforcement may include food treats, praise, petting, or a favorite toy or game. Food treats work especially well for training your dog. A treat should be enticing and irresistible to your pet. It should be a very small, soft, piece of food that he will immediately gulp down and look to you for more. If you give him something he has to chew or that breaks into bits and falls on the floor, he'll be looking around the floor, not at you. Small pieces of soft commercial treats, hot dogs, cheese, cooked chicken or beef, or miniature marshmallows have all proven successful. Experiment a bit to see what works best for your pet. You may carry the treats in a pocket or a fanny pack on the front of your belt. There are even special treat packs available in many pet stores. Each time you use a food reward, you should couple it with a verbal reward (praise). Say something like, "Good boy" in a positive, happy tone of voice.

Note: Some pets may not be interested in food treats. For those pets, the reward could be in the form of a toy or brief play. Find what is rewarding for your pet!

Continuous Reinforcement

When your pet is learning a new behavior, he should be rewarded *every time* he does the behavior (this is called continuous reinforcement). It may be necessary to use "shaping," with your pet—reinforcing something close to the desired response and gradually requiring more from your dog before he gets the treat. For example, if you're teaching your dog to "shake hands," you may initially reward him for lifting his paw off the ground, then for lifting it higher, then for touching your hand, then for letting you hold his paw and

finally, for actually shaking hands with you. Remember to reward each step of the way, even if your dog isn't technically performing the goal behavior yet.

Intermittent Reinforcement

Intermittent reinforcement can be used once your pet has reliably learned the behavior. At first, you may reward him with the treat three times out of four, then about half the time, then about a third of the time and so forth, until you're only rewarding him occasionally with the treat. Continue to praise him every time, although once he's learned the behavior, the praise can be less effusive—a quiet but positive “good boy.” Use a variable schedule of reinforcement, so he doesn't catch on that he only has to respond every other time. Your pet will learn that if he keeps responding, eventually he'll get what he wants. Don't jump too quickly into this step, it's not a bad thing to reward your dog often!

By understanding reinforcement, you can see that you're not always going to have to carry around a bag of treats with you. Your pet will soon be working for your verbal praise because that is rewarding too! And he knows that occasionally, he'll get a yummy treat. There are also many small opportunities throughout the day to reinforce his behavior. You may have him “sit” before letting him out the door (going through the door is the reward!) before petting him (helps prevent jumping up on people) or before giving him his food. Give him some pets or a “good dog” for lying quietly by your feet or slip a treat into his Kong toy when he's chewing it, instead of chewing on your shoe.

Remember to look out for neutral or good behavior that you may not be asking for. Any time your dog isn't doing something “bad,” reward that behavior! Reinforcing good behavior and rewarding your pup often will improve his quality of life and strengthen your relationship.

Punishment

Never use physical punishment as this always involves some level of discomfort or even pain. Scruff shakes, alpha rolls, shock collars, even just yelling at your pup are all likely to result in bites because they cause your dog to feel pain and fear. The punishment might also be associated with other stimuli—including people—that are present at the time the punishment occurs. For example, a pet that's punished for getting too close to a small child may become fearful of that child, resulting in unwanted and/or unsafe behavior.