

Using Rewards to Create & Shape Behaviors

What Is A Reward?

A reward is anything your pet desires. Just like us, when a behavior results in getting something that is desired, that behavior is more likely to be repeated. The most common rewards used in training are:

- Food
- Touch
- Attention

Whenever a pet does something we want to encourage (or train them to perform on command), giving them any of these three will make them more likely to repeat the behavior.

Accidental Rewards

Note that Touch and Attention are rewards we often give our pets inadvertently. A good example is the dog that jumps on you in greeting. Most people will try to discourage the behavior by saying “No” or “Stop” while pushing the dog away. While this doesn’t make the dog as happy as praise and a hug, you are still touching and attending to the dog – and thus encouraging the very behavior you want to stop. You should also note that if before feeding time your pet vocalizes or acts up, you are encouraging all those behaviors by rewarding them with food.

Training Behaviors with Rewards

1. Select a favorite treat that can be easily broken into very small bits – just larger than crumbs. From now on, this should only be used for training. This keeps both desire and motivation high.
2. When training any behavior initially, give the reward immediately (within 1 second) of performance of that behavior.
3. As the behavior becomes more reliable, demand better performance for reward. For example, teaching “lay” may start with rewarding going halfway down, but you should progress to the full body in contact with the floor, then the head, then being still and calm, etc.
4. When the behavior is performed accurately and reliably, start making the reward random and intermittent. You can also alternate with different rewards – other treats, touch, or attention. This makes the behavior more reliable.

Using Rewards to Change Problem Behaviors

Every behavior your pet performs is an attempt to get a reward. Changing problem behaviors can be accomplished in three steps:

1. Figure out what the reward they desire is (usually, it is your attention)
2. Stop rewarding that behavior inadvertently, or in other situations (see above). To discourage a behavior, the best strategy is to ignore it by removing all focus and attention from the pet. Do not look at, speak to, touch, or otherwise acknowledge them until the problem behavior stops.
3. Train the pet to perform an **acceptable** behavior, such as sitting, in order to get the desired reward.

Many common behavior problems can be addressed with this method, but not all. Certain behaviors, such as excessive barking, may be self-rewarding and require other interventions. Contact your veterinarian with questions.

