

Companion Animal Psychology

Because science matters to our dogs and cats.

Wednesday, 1 February 2017

What is Positive Reinforcement in Dog Training?

A user-friendly guide to everything you need to know about positive reinforcement.



If you are new to dogs, or new to dog training, this article is for you. It covers technical definitions, the practicalities, reasons to use positive reinforcement and some common mistakes that people make.

At the end, there are suggested resources in case you want to learn more. Positive reinforcement training is fun, and lots of people get the training bug. Hopefully that will include you too.

We'll get the technical definition out of the way first.

What is positive reinforcement?

Positive reinforcement is a very effective way to train dogs (and other animals).

Positive reinforcement means adding something immediately after a behaviour occurs that makes the frequency of the behaviour go up.

Technically speaking, the term breaks down into two parts. Reinforcement means the behaviour continues or goes up in frequency. (If the behaviour went down instead, it's not reinforcement).

And positive means something is added.

For example, you ask the dog to sit, the dog sits, and you give him a treat (something is added). The dog is more likely to sit next time you ask (the behaviour was reinforced).

What kind of reward is used in positive reinforcement?

For most dog training, food is the best reward to use. That's because all dogs like food, and it's efficient because you can deliver it quickly.

Play is sometimes used as a reward in dog training. For example, a game of tug or fetch. You may even have seen some working dogs or agility dogs be rewarded with a game of tug.

In practise food works best for most everyday dog training situations. You can deliver it much more quickly (think how long it takes to play a game of tug, compared to how long it takes your dog to gobble a treat). That means you can do another repetition right away. Also, sometimes play will get in the way of what you are trying to teach.

Petting and praise are sometimes suggested as rewards. But you have to think about it from the dog's perspective – and yes,

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scientists have thought about it too. One study found dogs are not interested in praise. It has to be conditioned to mean something. For example, if “good boy” is always followed by a treat, then they will learn it predicts a treat; but otherwise, nada, it’s meaningless (read more on [whether dogs prefer petting or praise](#)).



Most dogs do like petting, but the same scientists found that [dogs prefer food to petting as a reward in dog training](#). And in case you’re wondering, there are other [studies that compared food to petting as a reward in a dog training situation](#). They also found food leads to better results.

The efficiency issue is relevant too: food is quicker.

So food is the best reward to use as positive reinforcement.

What kind of food rewards should I use with my dog?

There’s a huge variety of food rewards, ranging from treats you can buy from the pet store to types of human food that are suitable for dogs and treats that you make yourself.

Pick something your dog really likes, because that means it will motivate them. Of course it needs to fit within an overall balanced diet. You may also want to vary the rewards, either just to provide variety or to suit the task you are training.

For example, if you are doing a lot of training, little cubes of chicken might be most appropriate because it’s a healthy component of a dog’s diet. Or you could use treats that are tiny so that you aren’t over-feeding (some come in miniature size). At other times, pieces of cheese or deli meats might be appropriate in suitable quantities. Use your very best rewards for teaching recall (i.e. to come when called).

Types of food you can use in positive reinforcement training include: little pieces of chicken; squares of roast beef; cubes of cheese (Cheddar, Parmesan, etc.); tiny dried fish; carrot; peanut butter treats; tuna fudge; tripe stick; rollover; Vienna Sausage; spam; Zuke’s minis or Fruitables minis; [Rawbble](#); dog biscuits; various chews or jerky strips; freeze-dried salmon; dried herring; salami; pieces of ham; turkey; bits of meat balls...

Did some of those items make your mouth water? That’s good, because that’s the effect you want it to have on your dog! Of course you don’t use a whole slice of ham all at once. Use something about the size of a pea. Why not try out several different food rewards to find out which your dog prefers?

As well as bite-size pieces, you can also deliver food rewards via a tube for the dog to lick. You can buy some ready-made (e.g. leanlix or [Lickety Stik](#)) or you can make your own using squeeze tubes (often found with camping supplies) or the [TreatToob](#).

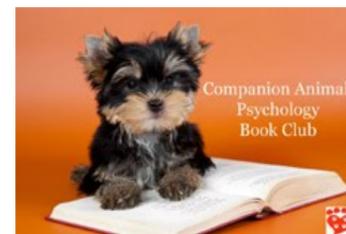
And although cats should not be fed dog food, it’s fine to give your dog cat food, and that can make a tasty reward too.

If purchasing treats, read the ingredients to check you are happy with them from a nutritional perspective, and go for something you think your dog will find tasty (duck, turkey, salmon, bacon, peanut butter, etc.).

Make sure it is safe for dogs. If buying human food for your dog, look out for onion (in some meat and other products) and xylitol (e.g. in some brands of peanut butter), neither of which is safe for dogs.

If you prefer to make your own treats, here is a [recipe for tuna fudge](#). You can substitute different ingredients, e.g. swap tuna for canned salmon or sardines.

How can I use positive reinforcement if my dog is on a special diet?



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is about the science of people's relationships with their pets. Topics include dog training, canine behaviour, feline behaviour, enrichment, behaviour problems, attachment to pets, and the human-animal bond. Dogs, cats, rabbits, ferrets, guinea pigs, horses and fish are all included. Topic suggestions are welcome. Companion Animal Psychology is based in Maple Ridge, BC, Canada.



If your dog is on a special diet, you can still use food rewards. One easy option is to use the canned version of whatever special kibble you normally feed. (If delivering it on a spoon, just be careful your dog doesn't eat the spoon; they may need some practise at licking it, or you might prefer to use a food tube).

Another option could be something that is an ingredient in the special diet (whether that's chicken or fish or whatever). You might also be able to tailor the tuna fudge recipe with ingredients that are right for your dog.

What do professional dog trainers use as rewards?

I asked [Kristi Benson CTC](#) what type of reward she uses when training dogs. Kristi is a dog trainer in Manitoba, Canada, and a staff member at the [Academy for Dog Trainers](#).

She said, "I like to use food, and types of food that I like to use are things that are choppable into small pieces and that can go down the hatch really quickly, so the dogs can eat them quickly so that I can recycle and do another trial really quickly.

"I also like using stuff that dogs really like, so stuff that's a little bit grouty, a little bit stinky, like smoked fish kind of stuff. Sometimes I use cheese. I do buy rollover sometimes, I know that's kind of the junk food, it's a little bit junk foody. But then I say to myself well, you know I get junk food occasionally too, so if I'm not training a dog that often... And it's very easy, and you know it's supposed to be a complete meal which seems reasonable.

"And I also use some recipes that are floating around the dog training community, and they're like tuna fudge, liver brownies. And then I have another recipe that I like which is made out of eggs, because we get a lot of eggs here on the farm so, if we have an extra dozen eggs it's nice to make an egg dish. And those are baked into squares, and you can cut those up." (Kristi has published [the treat recipes](#) on her website).

And for recall: "I go volume with recall when I'm training my dogs, just because it's easier. But I recommend to my clients things like tinned tripe in a tube, to really ratchet up the palatability factor, along with amount. So give them quite a bit and give them something that's really delicious."

What is not positive reinforcement

Sometimes people make the mistake of calling the moment when something unpleasant stops positive reinforcement. It's not.

For example, some shock collar trainers pretend that when the electric shock stops, it is rewarding for the dog. It is not.

Relief is not the same as a reward.

Remember too: positive reinforcement means something has been added. Stopping something is the opposite of adding something.

It's worth being alert to this because there are many [weasel words used in dog training](#) and there's a lot of erroneous [dog training information on the internet](#).

Because there is no regulation of dog trainers, this is unfortunately something dog owners need to be aware of.

But my dog is not food-motivated!



This is something I hear from time to time. If it is truly the case that your dog is not interested in food then you need to take him to see a vet. If your dog is not eating there may be an underlying medical problem that needs urgent investigation.

More often when people say this it turns out the food they are using is not particularly motivating. For example, they prefer to use kibble, but this is not exciting enough to motivate their dog.

It's a common mistake for people to make when they are new to dog training. If this applies to you, check the list above to find another food item to try. And then a different item too. You can audition a few to see which are your dog's favourites – and remember that variety can help as well.



Sometimes people are reluctant to use food in dog training, and that's why they are using kibble. But you have to feed your dog, so you might as well make some of it tasty food to use in training.

Some people are worried it might affect their relationship with their dog – perhaps they fear their dog doesn't really love them if he wants to work for food. But your dog can love you and food (there's even [an fMRI study to show it](#)).

And when you see that happy, expectant look on your dog's face when they are about to receive a cookie, doesn't it fill you with a lovely warm mushy feeling?

Why use positive reinforcement in dog training?

Many studies find that [people who use reward-based training methods report their dogs as being more obedient](#) than those who use aversive techniques. Using [positive reinforcement is better for the human-canine bond and better for animal welfare](#) than using negative reinforcement. Also, a past [history of using positive reinforcement in dog training is linked to better success](#) at teaching a new behaviour. (If you want to read the research for yourself, see my list of [dog training research resources](#)).

In contrast, the [use of punishment has been associated with an aggressive response](#) from some dogs and the use of [aversive techniques is a risk factor for aggression](#) towards both family members and strangers outside the home.

Although these studies are correlational and do not prove causation, there are several things that might explain it. One is that positive reinforcement teaches your dog what to do, instead of simply punishing them for a behaviour (which doesn't teach them a new behaviour to do instead).



Another is that dogs may find punishment stressful, and if they associate the owner as the cause of the punishment, it may affect the relationship with their owner.

There's another reason to use positive reinforcement: dogs like to work to earn rewards (dubbed the 'Eureka! effect'). And scientists now recommend that [good animal welfare includes positive experiences](#).

So using positive reinforcement in dog training is good for your dog. For more information, see my article [seven reasons to use reward-based dog training methods](#).

Why is positive reinforcement not working?

If you're thinking, "But I tried positive reinforcement and it didn't work!" there are several possible reasons.

Perhaps the most common is not using the right reward to motivate the dog. Go back to the list of suggested food rewards and find something tastier to try.

But there are several other possible reasons too. Here are a few of them.

Maybe you aren't using a plan but are making it up as you go along. You'll get better results if you follow a plan. (If you want to learn more, see Jean Donaldson's [Train Your Dog Like a Pro](#) which includes sample plans for obedience behaviours).

Maybe you aren't delivering the food rewards fast enough. For example, you ask your dog to lie down, but by the time you are ready to give them the reward, they have already jumped up and moved around so in fact you rewarded the wrong behaviour. You need to have the rewards ready to be delivered quickly.

Maybe because you know you have to deliver the rewards quickly, you are actually moving your hand to your bait bag or crinkling your baggie before the dog has done the behaviour you asked for. That's very confusing. A hint you might be doing this is if your dog is busy watching your treat hand!

Or perhaps you're just making it too hard for the dog. It's very common to think the dog has learned the behaviour when they just practised it once or twice. It's like if you were learning to waltz; moving your feet the right way a few times isn't enough to be able to waltz; it takes more practice. Your dog needs lots of practise too.

And speaking of practise, you also have to build up the distractions very slowly. Just because your dog knows how to sit in the kitchen when nothing else is happening, doesn't mean he can still sit at the park when other dogs are running around, a child is approaching and a skunk just popped out from behind a tree. That's a sudden leap in difficulty!



These are all things you can work on, but dog training is a skilled activity and there is nothing to be ashamed of if you are struggling. You may need to ask for help from a qualified dog trainer or take your dog to a class. Because dog training is not regulated, make sure you read my article on [how to choose a dog trainer](#) first and pick someone who is suitably qualified.

See below for some suggestions for further reading if you want to work on your training technique.

But the trainer says it won't work for my dog?!

Some dog trainers will say 'positive reinforcement isn't working' or 'it won't work for this dog' as an attempt to justify using a shock collar.

First of all, remember that dog training isn't regulated. Look through the list above of some of the technical things dog trainers need to learn. Unfortunately it's possible that some people are making mistakes themselves and blaming it on the dog.

Secondly, it's important to know there are risks to the use of a shock collar. One experimental study in the UK concluded that [shock collars do not work any better than positive reinforcement](#) for teaching dogs to come when called in the presence of livestock. They also found negative effects on welfare for some dogs.

Look after your dog, and don't let a dog trainer use methods you aren't happy with.

(See more [resources on shock collars](#)).

Do I have to use a clicker?

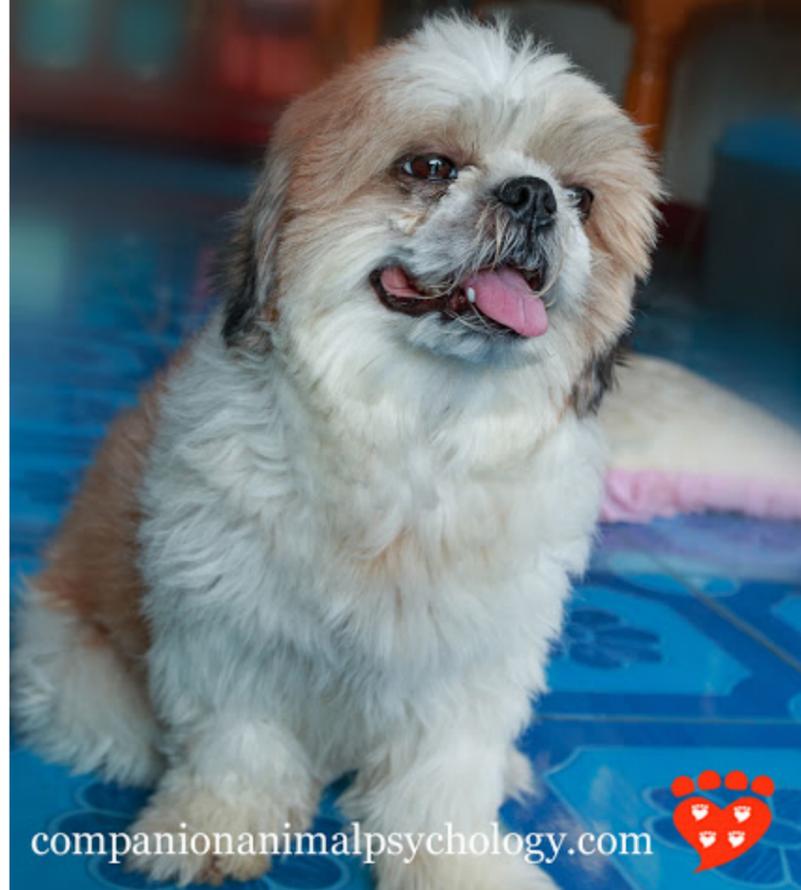
It's up to you.

Clickers are used to mark the moment the dog is doing the right behaviour. It's very quick, so it buys you time to get the treat out and give it to your dog.

Some people absolutely love using a clicker. They also think it helps improve their technique (perhaps because they are paying close attention to when to click, and not to move before then).

Some people really don't like the clicker. They find it clunky and awkward or too complicated. Luckily for them, there is a study that found [using a clicker versus a verbal marker or no marker](#) at all (just food rewards) didn't make much difference to training success. This is something we need more research on.

Positive reinforcement in dog training: A user-friendly guide



For behaviours that are brief and fleeting, a marker (your voice or a clicker) will really help. But for many of the behaviours we teach, like sit and lie down and come when we call, we don't need such precise timing.

The most important thing is to use food rewards to train your dog. If you try the clicker and like it, that's great, and lots of people do. But if you don't like it, don't worry about it. Just keep using food.

Will I always have to use positive reinforcement?

This is a common question and it's easily answered with another question: Will you want your dog to keep doing the behaviour? If so, you'll want to keep rewarding it.

Now, you might not always reward every single time. Using an intermittent reinforcement schedule (in which the behaviour is only rewarded sometimes) can help build up resistance to extinction (that's when the behaviour stops). That's useful, because in real life there might be an occasion when you forgot to put some dog treats in your pocket.

But it's a very common mistake to stop rewarding a behaviour altogether. The end result is that the dog stops doing it, and people say "I tried it, and it didn't work." Actually, the technical term is extinction: you extinguished the behaviour because you stopped rewarding it.

Another very common mistake is to not reward a behaviour often enough.

Remember that dogs like to work for food, and you have to feed your dog anyway. Training for food rewards is a good way to exercise your dog's brain and provide enrichment. Instead of trying to stop, it's best to keep thinking of new things to teach your dog.

For the people training their cats...

You can use positive reinforcement with any species, and that includes cats. Remember that because cats are small, they only need small rewards. Check out my [interview with Dr. Sarah Ellis about her book *The Trainable Cat*](#) to learn more.

Final words and further reading on positive reinforcement

Hopefully this article has provided you with useful information about the use of positive reinforcement in dog training. If you liked it, please share with your friends.

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What type of food reward does your dog like best?

Further reading

[Culture Clash](#) by Jean Donaldson. (You might also like to check out my [interview with Jean Donaldson](#) to mark 20 years since the first publication of this influential book).

[Train Your Dog Like a Pro](#) by Jean Donaldson.

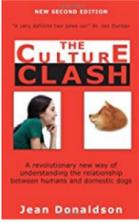
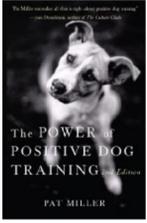
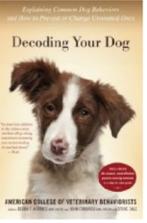
[The Other End of the Leash: Why We Do What We Do Around Dogs](#) by Patricia McConnell.

[The Power of Positive Dog Training](#) by Pat Miller.

[Don't Shoot the Dog: The New Art of Teaching and Training](#) by Karen Pryor.

If you want to know more about any of the studies mentioned in this article, click the link and you will be taken to a page with a summary, the full reference, and a link to the academic paper. For a more complete list, check out my [dog training research resources page](#) which lists scientific papers about dog training and places where you can read about them for free, on this blog and elsewhere.

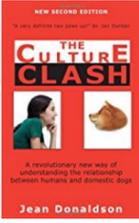
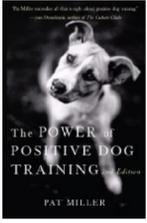
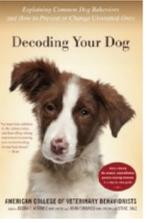
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Posted by [Zazie Todd, PhD, for Companion Animal Psychology](#) at 07:30:00

Labels: [dog training](#), [dogs](#)

4 comments:



[joyce kesling, CDBC](#) 1 February 2017 at 12:54

Thanks for writing this. You think we're making progress only to realize we're not making enough and there's more than one explanation! 8)

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[Zazie Todd, PhD, for Companion Animal Psychology](#) 1 February 2017 at 19:23

Thank you, Joyce. I'm glad you like it!

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[Synergy Behavior Solutions](#) 1 February 2017 at 21:50

Amazing! What a wonderful article! :-)

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Zazie Todd, PhD, for Companion Animal Psychology  12 February 2017 at 15:01

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