Using an Irresistible Toy as Reinforcement in Training

Toys can be great reinforcers for good behavior. You can teach your dog to love playing with you and a toy, although this exercise assumes that there are toys your dog already loves to play with. You also need to be able to get the toy from the dog easily. If you can’t do either of those things, you have some training to do to be prepared for this exercise – see Playing by the Rules in the instruction book for some tips.

Use a toy that allows you to interact with your dog at a close distance. If you are using a ball, you can toss it a very short distance, having the dog catch it in his mouth is great, or the distance in which you can keep the dog on a leash and still engage in play. If you are using a tug toy, you will keep hold of one end during play.

Engage your dog in play with the toy – start a tugging session or toss a ball a short distance for a dog that loves to retrieve. Get the toy/ball back then ask for a simple behavior such as a sit, or eye contact. As soon as the dog responds, say “Yes” (or other verbal marker) and engage in play again for several

seconds. It is very important that the verbal marker marks the behavior you are trying to reinforce and comes before any body/arm movement that starts the play. Repeat! The play should reinforce the behavior you marked with the “Yes”. You can use a release cue (such as “OK” or “Break”) as a marker, if your dog knows that already.

Be aware that eye contact (or indeed, sit) may be difficult for those dogs that really love their ball! Avoid holding the ball up in front of you – hold it by your side or even behind you. Start with a behavior that the dog can do easily, and soon you will be able to use an irresistible toy to reinforce many different behaviors. The easiest behavior may be simply to wait for a moment of stillness/calm, which you can mark verbally, then throw ball or engage tug.