Training your dog to love the Bailey chair

My two year old, 68 pound dog, had been eating while standing on steps. When I got my chair built, I thought I could ask him to go right in and eat. Wrong! He did back into the chair, then when I lifted up his paws and put the support bar in, he shot out of the chair like a rocket.

(I should have known better – I am a professional dog trainer)

If something an animal does (such as looking at you) is followed immediately by the delivery of something the animal really likes (such as food), and this sequence is repeated many times, the animal will look at you more frequently in the future. The animal learns to offer the behavior that earns them something they are willing to work for. That is the basic way that positive reinforcement training works.

With our megaesophagus dogs, food can only be delivered when they are in an upright position and in several discrete meals in a day - giving many small treats in a training session may result in regurgitation. However, the regular feeding events can be used as positive reinforcement at the end of a short training session, and I suggest that training sessions (just one to two minutes) happen immediately before feeding events.

The behavior of getting into and remaining in the Bailey chair has several parts to it, and it will help the dog if you break the sequence down into many steps, and think of the whole “getting into the chair and eating there“ behavior as a long chain of many smaller behaviors.

Teaching the dog each link in the chain will make it easier for the dog to perform the whole chain. Your dog may already be able to do parts of the chain and may not need all the baby steps, but if you are struggling/fighting with your dog, they do need smaller steps. Take it one step at a time.

Before trying to use the Bailey chair:

Train your dog to love supported sitting upright – this includes:

* Accepting tail and back legs being handled
* Accepting tail and back legs being tucked between legs while sitting
* Sitting with tail between legs
* Being assisted to sitting upright (on padded surface) with support
* Sitting upright (on padded surface) with support
* Eating while sitting upright (on padded surface) with support

Whatever way you are feeding the dog before using the Bailey chair, as soon as you have the chair built, start feeding the dog near where the chair is located.

Each of the bulleted steps above is something you can do with your dog while giving him praise and petting, and licks of food off a spoon (just a taste - remember you are doing this just before upright feeding). Watch the dog’s body language – you want him to be relaxed and happy, not stressed and struggling.

Having a second person to give licks of food off a spoon is very helpful. If you think the lick off the spoon will cause regurgitation, then just use praise and petting.

For example, your dog may not be accustomed to his tail being handled – take the time to get him used to that by touching his tail and then giving him something he does like – petting on other body parts he does like, praise, or a lick of food (again, you can do this just before he is upright or while in upright position).

When you are feeding your dog, I suggest spoon feeding for two reasons: You can control how much goes in at one time and each spoonful can reinforce calm behavior while upright/in the chair. Wait for a moment of calm and stillness, say “YES!” (in a happy, upbeat tone) and give a spoonful of food. Wait for calm/stillness again, say “YES!” to mark it, give another spoonful, etc. The “YES!” should be simultaneous with the calm/still behavior, marking it and predicting a spoonful of food for the dog. That will increase the calm/still behavior and associate the “YES!” with food, which is a primary reinforcer for all animals (we all have to eat to survive).

“YES!” will become, after many spoonfuls, a powerful secondary reinforcer and can be used to increase other desirable behaviors. You have several feedings each day with many spoonfuls, so this should be easy to do. Don’t say “NO” if the dog is doing something you don’t want in the chair – saying anything gives the dog attention and can increase that behavior. Wait for an instant of calm or calmer behavior, say “YES!” and give a spoonful. We are training the dog what we want them to do.

You will know that “YES!” means something to your dog when you say it to your dog outside of the feeding event and you see his happy response. After you have established this happy response, occasionally use the “YES!” while in the chair just before a spoonful of food to maintain the positive association between the word and the food.

Approaching and feeding in the Bailey Chair includes the following steps:

* Approaching the chair, turning in front of it
* Backing up
* Backing up into the chair
* Sitting in the chair with tail being tucked between legs
* Being assisted to sitting upright
* Accepting supporting legs on the support bar
* Eating in the chair
* Sitting in the chair after eating

Don’t expect that your dog will go right into the Bailey chair the first time. Even though he should be comfortable being supported in the upright position before you start with the chair, the chair is confining and he may find it alarming.

Dogs don’t know right or wrong, they know safe and unsafe.

I used the food bowl as a lure to walk my dog to the chair and turn in front of it. Try the first couple of steps with a lick of food after gently guiding your dog through each one, then go back to your original feeding method to deliver the meal. Next meal, try another step towards your end goal of feeding in the Bailey chair.

After my first unsuccessful attempt with the chair, I went through the steps outlined in this plan and after 4 days, my dog was eating happily in the Bailey chair, where he now gets his regular 4-5 meals per day. I did initially use a smaller diameter front leg support for a few days after my dog was eating in the chair (the 3” diameter plastic pipe in front of him was too confining at first), then I switched to the larger pipe and he was fine with it.

The fit of the chair is very important – the upright position is not a natural one for your dog and his body needs to be fully supported. See the Yahoo group for information on measuring your dog for the chair, and look for pictures of dogs similar in shape to yours for examples of good fit. The chair needs to be well padded and be able to hold the dog in place so his body does not slump forward or to the side.

Pay attention to the orientation of your dog’s front legs when he is in a supported upright position – you may want to make some additional measurements to help you locate the position of the support bar. The shoulders of dogs do not have the range of motion that humans have, make sure the position you will be putting your dog’s front legs into will be comfortable for him.

I also suggest that you observe your dog sitting on a hard floor surface. Many dogs with long legs actually sit on the back of their legs, and their butt does not touch the ground. In order for them to be comfortable in the chair, they will require extra padding. If you dog has a short tail, notice what he does with his tail when he sits on his own, and plan to accommodate that.

Summary:

* Short training sessions should happen right before feeding events.
* Choose a single syllable word (such as “Yes!” or “Yup!”) to associate with mouthfuls of food during feeding events. Use this word to mark and reward behavior you want.
* Observe your dog carefully – watch for signs of stress – ears laid back, whites of eyes showing, mouth tightly closed, struggling.
* Teach the dog to love the upright feeding position first.
* Feed the dog near the chair even before you start to use the chair.
* Break the chair feeding sequence down into baby steps.

Dawn Gilkison - Positive Solutions Dog Training - info@trainpositivedog.com