

The Agility Screwup Cookie

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Practice Makes Pawfect

No great training technique is as underused as the 'screwup cookie'. What is a screwup cookie? It is the reward your dog gets when you, the handler, screwup whatever maneuver you are trying with the dog.

The typical training scenario: the handler has a plan, the handler cues the dog to start the sequence, but the communication from the handler may leave the dog wondering what they are supposed to do, so the dog tries something. If that something is not what the handler wanted, the handler may cheerfully call the dog and reset. Or the handler may sigh, slump, curse under their breath, or worse yet, yell "No" at the dog. All because the dog guessed incorrectly. Depending on the dog's personality, this leads to the dog either ignoring the handler and doing something more rewarding (sniffing, leaving), slowing down until they are absolutely certain what the handler wants ("this jump? You mean this jump right here? Are you sure?") or having a meltdown and not even trying at all. Even the cheerful reset by the handler could be construed by an overly sensitive dog as a 'failure' in their mind.

Now the handler may think it was the dog that screwed up. And why should the dog get rewarded when they obviously know what I'm asking and can do it perfectly other times? But as we've discussed in previous articles, 'knowing something' in one scenario is totally different to the dog than 'knowing something' everywhere, in every scenario. And let's face it, we think we are doing it right, at least until our instructor or the video shows that our bodies



were in fact directing the dog towards what they guessed was the answer.

And speaking of questions and answers: "What day is it?" "Wednesday" we say with confidence. "What day is it?" "Oh uh, the 12th" said with slightly less confidence. "What day is it?" "Um, April 12th, 2023?". "What day is it?" Now we are stumped and uncomfortable. We've given them

good answers. We've gotten no more clarity on what they want to know. We are running out of what we consider 'correct' answers. Did the asker want the day of the week, the date, or the slang term of "Hump Day"? Bottom line, we are not enjoying talking to this person anymore. They are stressing us out.

'Screwup' cookie to the rescue. When a mistake is made in training, the handler should evaluate if the dog could be conceivably correct. If so, and always giving the benefit of the doubt, the dog gets rewarded somehow. I'd say this is the case 95% of the time. It could just be pats and praise of 'nice try', or continuing the sequence to the next successful point, then a good reward. But if the dog is working with you, they get rewarded.

While rewarding the dog, the handler should be thinking about what to change on the next try to be more successful. The handler could present the cue more correctly or in a more obvious way. Maybe bringing in a prop to help make the 'right' decision by the dog more likely. Our goal is dog training is to always keep the success (and therefore the reward) rate high. Who wouldn't want to play a game you feel successful at?



What if there is nothing at all you could possibly reward in what the dog just did? Then you ask the dog to do something you know there is a 99% chance they will do (a sit, a trick, etc), and reward that. Or even just reward them for coming back to you.

The screwup cookie is just a small normal reward, not a 'jackpot' of lots of wonderful treats or wild play session. It is a way to keep the dog in the game while giving you a chance to think about next steps. You may decide to do the exact same thing (maybe with better body positioning) and see if the dog figures out what you want. Or maybe break out the 'hard' part and train that small portion with good rewards then try putting the full sequence back together. When the dog correctly guesses what you want with that verbal or physical cue, then you party! Now the dog says "When he does this, I'm supposed to do that. Got it." And that is training with an engaged and happy dog.

Happy Practicing!

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