

Treat Time?



People love their dogs. We show our dogs how much we love them by showering them with toys, affection, praise and, often, tasty treats. We dole out these goodies on a regular basis, on a random basis and sometimes for no reason at all. This practice of giving dogs treats “just for the heck of it” is all fine and good, but by doing so you are missing out on some wonderful opportunities to train your dog and to make him or her much happier.

Dogs Need Gainful Employment

If your dog is imperfect or has things to learn—like most dogs, including mine—the practice of handing out treats, praise, affection and anything else for no good reason is doing the dog a terrible disservice. That’s because dogs, not unlike people, need jobs to do and without them feel lost or without purpose.

I like to tell people that the number one problem with pet dogs is that they are horribly underemployed. Our pet dogs (even the mutts) are, by and large, incredibly well bred in the sense that they were designed with the DNA to motivate certain instincts like herding, hunting, chasing and catching vermin and so on. In other words, dogs were meant to work for a living. Without purpose pet dogs are apt to get into a world of trouble!

Without jobs to do, dogs will find other things to do and will “self-assign” the job of say, chewing your furniture, or digging holes in your backyard or barking at everyone who passes your uncovered windows. Without gainful employment, pet dogs become either destructive or neurotic or, if you are very unlucky, both.

Nothing in Life is Free

Human beings understand and accept the fact that we get nothing in life for free, but our dogs have to be trained to understand this. Begin the practice of assigning your dog the “job” of doing something for a treat, a belly rub or a bully stick. In dog training this is actually called “Nothing in Life is Free,” a training philosophy that has been around for a long while but is not often practiced with much consistency.

For all types of reasons, we stop asking our dogs to perform for the things they enjoy. This is unfortunate, because dogs both need and enjoy working. And, if we find jobs for our dogs and reward the behaviors we like, we just may be able to

gain control and correct unwanted behaviors that often go unresolved for the dog’s entire life.

Take, for example, a German shepherd mix named Max, adopted by a mother and daughter when he was already a year old. He was a big ninety-five pounds and had inadvertently learned that it was fine to “play-bite” on his female owners’ arms and legs. Immediately, Max was put on an intensive routine of consequence-based training, which included manipulating him using treats, praise, affection and play—all the things he craved. Within a short time Max was eliciting all the right behaviors, play biting with other dogs instead of his owners and was becoming a wonderful companion for both Mom and daughter.

Be Selective When Handing out a Treat

Another perfect example is Bella, a sweet eight-month-old Weimaraner puppy who is a chronic jumper. She is lightning quick, incredibly agile and has the potential to knock you down in an instant. The remedy to the unwanted jumping is to turn quickly and ask her to sit. If she is successful, she gets both praise and affection as well as a treat. If not, the response is “too bad,” and we walk away in a huff. For some dogs that are hard-wired to jump like Bella, this may be a lifelong challenge. What is most important is that we try very hard to successfully redirect the unwanted behavior and be sure only to deliver a treat or praise them when they do it just right.

Treats are a Powerful Tool

When used correctly, treats can work as a powerful tool to manipulate a dog’s behavior. If you are uncertain, it is better to withhold a treat than it is to give one out. In teaching basic obedience, I ask clients to put their dog in a “relaxed down” position, where the dog actually slightly rolls onto one hip and is more likely to remain down. If we deliver a treat to the dog only when he or she assumes the relaxed down position, this is the position the dog will assume every time we say “down.” Ultimately, achieving this position enables us to teach the dog the “down stay” command.

Many people are still uncomfortable with giving dogs treats to get them to perform or behave and wonder if the dog will become dependent on treats, or will fail to perform without them. The answer, through much testing and research, is that dogs do not work for free and need the hope of a treat. How and when we give out the treats will allow us to improve the dog’s skills and assist in making the dog less reliant on the treat itself.

Fading Out Treats Can Help Improve Skills

As dogs begin to perform skills in a variety of circumstances or with more or different distractions (called “generalizing”), we can begin to fade out the treats. Doing this actually helps the dog to maintain or even increase his facility with each skill.

In our group classes we ask all our dogs to progress from a fixed-treat schedule (one treat for every skill they perform correctly) to an intermittent treat schedule, where they will get one treat for say every three tricks they do correctly. The dog learns that before she gets the treat, she has to perform "sit," "down" and "wait."

As the dog gets more reliable in performing each skill we can delay the delivery of the treat, progressing eventually to a "random" treat schedule. As you might suspect by its name, this treat schedule involves giving the dog a treat only when you feel it really deserves to get it: for example, if a dog performs a skill that is difficult for him or if he performs an easier skill, but with many distractions.

Use Tiny, Soft Training Treats

It is especially important to give dogs soft treats when using them for training. Dogs have a miniscule attention span, so if the treat is hard and crunches, the dog will actually miss out on why he is being treated and, instead, focus more on the crunching. Soft training treats can be broken into small bits that work just as well as larger treats. If you fill your dog up on treats, she will not stay motivated for long.

Here are a few basic reminders about giving dogs treats for training purposes.

1. Deliver the treat quickly after the dog elicits the desired behavior - timing is important.
2. High value treats (very tasty treats) will help achieve hard to get behaviors.
3. Be selective in giving out treats! It's better to withhold a treat than to deliver one for the wrong behavior.
4. When working with treats make sure that there are no other dogs around. Treats can cause fights with very food motivated dogs.

We Don't Work for Free, Why Should Our Dogs?

Remember, just like their owners, dogs need motivation to work. It is perfectly fine to hand out treats to your best canine friend, but it's best to do it with a plan and a purpose. If you do, you will have a happier dog—one that is gainfully employed performing many of the desired skills in exchange for tasty rewards. 🐾

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