



Treats

I have to write this article because of the grand misconceptions that exist relating to the proper use of treats in dog training. To start with I will admit that I am not a typical “treat trainer.” That is to say I’m not the guy who shows up with a pouch full of treats dispensing them every time the dog looks at me. However, treats play an important part in training a dog, that part is building a relationship.

Since we are trying to start a dog off on a positive foot, or should I say paw, we must cement the relationship with the dog, and one certain way to do this is to offer the dog something of value for relating / responding to us. We use treats to enforce, in the dog's mind, *that the action he did is something that we approve of*. This is the opposite of a correction, where we use a correction to enforce, in the dog's mind, *that the action he did was something we don't approve of*.

We can take dog training from any angle we want, but to be fair, we want the dog to relate to things we *want* him to do. In order to do this in a way that is most beneficial to our teaching, and the dog's ability to learn, we use a mark (a treat) to cement the approval. If we were teaching a human we could merely use praise with a payoff at the end. The use of treats will teach the dog that the tone of voice we use when we “reward” the dog is something that relates to reward.

The words we say when relating to the dog is just gibberish to the dog, so we have to associate something that the dog understands, food is an easy one. If you want to lessen your load in training, using treats is a good place to start.

A common misconception with trainers who are ignorant of canine behavior is that if I stop giving treats, the dog will stop performing. These are often times the trainers that say a good pop will teach the dog faster than using treats. This may be true, but you are using a fear-based way to teach the dog something that they can learn much more easily through a positive experience. Anyone using a method like this is generally lazy.

There are those trainers that walk on either side of the training line: either you use positive based training and no corrections or you use correction based training and no treats. Walking these extremes is a sure fire way to miss the boat on most of the dogs

that need a balance. I've trained the most aggressive dogs as well as the most timid dogs; the one common thread is that *there is no commonality among most dogs*. Each dog is an individual and requires a specific approach. I've always found the best way to approach a dog is to start with the idea that all is fair, and that means starting out with a system of rewards. I leave the next step up to the dog. The direction I will take from here will be up to how the dog relates to my initial approach.

One thing I am more than certain of is that a dog will not stop a positive behavior if I don't have treats with me. Once I have trained a dog properly treats are not necessary, just like a correction is not necessary if the dog was trained through compulsion based training.

Using science to prove this point, Dr. Pavlov rang a bell every time the dog was about to be fed. Eventually when the bell was rung the dog would salivate even if a meal did not follow. Therefore we want to be certain to cement the concept that the treat goes hand in hand with the praise, and that the praise is the true reward. If the dog is taught this properly he will respond as strongly to the praise as he does to the treat, and eventually the praise from us will mean more to him than the physical treat.

During our training, we can use treats to lure a dog, shape a dog's techniques and reward a dog. This is a stress free way to teach a dog and to get him to understand our lessons. It also serves to reward the dog in a way he understands. When we see the results of the dog's training we can use intermittent rewards and the dog will move away from the concept that every action requires a reward. We continue to praise the dog and use our voice as a marker or reward. Once the behavior is solid we don't need to use a treat to reward every time. However, if I've trained my dog to COME by using a treat, and the one time I really need him to COME I don't have a treat, do you honestly think: 1. He'll know before he gets to me that I don't have the treat, and 2. He'll be really upset that he didn't get a reward this ONE time? I don't think so.

I use treats as a system to watch for a dog's drive as well. If I see a dog getting stressed, I can tell by his enthusiasm for the treat how stressed he is. If he stops taking treats, I know he may be a bit stressed and we can take a break.

The only people who don't believe in giving treats to a dog during training are those with egos that keep them from thinking about the dog. Just like the people who say you always have to use treats are very short sighted on a dog's drive. Some dogs don't love treats and work better for praise or toys. If you really want to understand how best to train a dog, you first need to figure out what motivates the dog.

If you can train a dog using treats (and you use those treats in a proper fashion), you'll probably end up with a better dog than the person who trains using only corrections. Of course, balancing training and understanding when a dog needs a treat and when they need a correction is the best approach to dog training. Dog training is an art and a science; we have to understand what we are dealing with and how best to make it work.

Each dog is a unique individual that will relate differently to different people and to different stimuli.

Balancing the scales between treats and proper corrections takes time and skill; there are no shortcuts. Shortcuts do not lend themselves to positive results. I've seen the failure on both sides of the training spectrum. Training your dog should be a fun and positive experience for both you and your dog. The more fun the lessons are, the more likely your dog is to learn and the more likely you are to continue the training. When it becomes a chore, you're headed down a dead end road.

The most important aspect of training your dog is the relationship you have with your dog. That is why I urge you to spend a good long time building a relationship with your dog before you ever start to train him. Read my article on Building a Relationship with your dog. It is much better to have a well-balanced dog than a well-trained dog.

The misconception that there is only one way to approach dog training is short sighted at best. It's a concept that is held by those that espouse knowledge before understanding. If you want to do what is best for your dog, learn to understand your dog and see what he loves and what he needs. Understand that it will take time to relate to him and patience for him to relate to you.

Dog training has inherent risks. I urge you to research and consult a professional for training advice.

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