Using rewards effectively

Reward-based training

The key to the effective use of rewards involves giving the reward immediately when the desired response is exhibited (contiguous) but only when the response is exhibited (contingent). For positive reinforcement to be effective, the reward must be given immediately following the desired response so that it increases the chance that the response will be repeated.

Reward selection and timing

1. Anything that your pet enjoys can be a reward. This can include treats, food, a toy, attention, play, affection, going for a walk, or even a rub of its head or belly as long it is given immediately when the behavior is performed and at a time when your pet wants it. Since there is a great deal of individual variation you must first choose the rewards that most appeal to your pet.

2. Whenever you give the pet something it enjoys, you are positively reinforcing whatever behavior the pet is performing at that time, whether desirable or undesirable. Therefore, never give a reward unless it immediately follows a behavior you wish to encourage. Therefore if the pet is exhibiting an undesirable behavior that you should not reinforce, ask the pet to perform another acceptable behavior or ignore it until it behaves acceptably and immediately reward that behavior.

3. Predictable rewards: rewards should be used only as positive reinforcement for desirable responses. The focus should be on owner consistency and predictability so that the pet learns what behaviors (e.g., sit, lie down) get rewards. Then when the pet responds consistently and reliably the owners can add cue words and gradually shape longer and calmer responses.

4. For some dogs, food rewards are more effective when the pet is hungry, such as around meal time. Therefore, if treats are not exceptionally appealing and your pet is fed free-choice, it might be better to switch to a feeding schedule. Training can be held just prior to meal times in order to increase the appeal of the rewards.

5. Reinforcer assessment: assess the motivating value of rewards and place them in order from most desirable to least desirable. Use your dog's most favored rewards or multiple rewards (reward jackpot) to shape and reward newer, more difficult, or more exact training responses and use lesser rewards for intermittently reviewing and rewarding previously learned responses or less exact responses.

6. Timing: dogs learn the fastest when the most valuable reward is given immediately following the desired behavior, every time the behavior is performed. Later, a switch to a variable intermittent reward schedule will help your pet continue to exhibit the desired behavior.

7. Secondary reinforcers: a clicker can be paired to a food reward by consistently sounding it just prior to giving the food until it becomes a conditioned stimulus for food. The value of a clicker is that it can then be used as a reward to mark correct responses immediately in a convenient and precise manner, with the food being given shortly afterwards. Other reinforcers such as praise or stroking may be sufficient to reinforce behaviors but may get more consistent responses if they are paired intermittently with a food treat.

8. Extinction: if you stop reinforcing a previously reinforced behavior, it will eventually stop being performed. This is often the best way to stop undesirable behaviors that have been reinforced by attention, praise, affection, or food (e.g., jumping up, barking). However, behavior problems that have been rewarded intermittently will take much longer to become extinct.

Cue–response–reward training

1. In simple terms, you need to give a cue prior to a behavior and then reward the desired response immediately and every time until the pet consistently responds. Begin the training in an environment with few distractions when the pet is calm. Start with simple verbal and visual (hand) cues, and gradually progress to more difficult cues in more difficult environments. Use mildly appealing treats at first, and save the highly favored rewards for later when the pet is giving more improved responses in difficult situations. This will encourage the dog to progress and improve. Alternately you can give a strong reward the first few times but then save them for increasingly better responses (longer, more relaxed, more distractions) later in training.

2. If the pet does not immediately respond to the cue then there are several possible explanations. The dog does not understand the cue, the dog has not heard the cue, or the motivation to perform an alternative behavior is greater (distraction). If you are sure that the dog understands the cue, then you could give no reward and wait so that the dog can decide how to respond or progress a little more slowly. Another option is to consider a physical control device such as a leash and head halter to guide the dog into the correct response physically.

3. Punishment should *never* be used for training. Punishment for incorrect responses may stop undesirable behavior but can lead to fear and anxiety, damage the bond with your dog, and will in no way encourage your pet to display the desired response.

Training with rewards: cue–response–reward

1. If a cue is paired with a response and there is immediate reward, the pet should learn the desired response for each cue. Once a response can consistently be achieved on cue, shaping can be used to progress to more difficult responses in a variety of environments.

2. Food lure training
    (a) The movement of food is used to lure the pet into performing the desired behavior. Holding and wiggling the food in front of the dog should lure the dog into a "come," while moving the food upward and back over the head should lure the dog into a "sit." Moving the food down and slightly forward should lure the dog into a "down."
    (b) A cue word (command) is spoken only after the pet has performed the behavior several times.
    Then the word cue should be given as the pet is performing the movement.
    (c) The food is given *immediately* upon completion.
    (d) As training progresses, the lure is made less obvious by being presented in a closed hand, and quiet praise and stroking are intermittently substituted for the food reward.

3. Observe and reward
    Observe the pet for desired behaviors and reward immediately. If a behavior can be anticipated, a cue can be given just prior to the behavior and then an immediate reward can be given once the behavior is completed. Some dogs can learn to eliminate on cue with this technique.

4. Physical prompt and fade
    Give a verbal and/or visual cue as you use a prompt such as a head halter or hand prompt (e.g., guiding the pet into a sit position) to get the desired response, and then reinforce. Over time, the prompt can be faded (i.e., gradually removed).

5. Shaping
    Determine the desired response and reward behaviors that approximate the response. Once successful, only behaviors that are slightly closer to the desired goal are rewarded, while less accurate responses are no longer rewarded.

Punishment

1. No physical punishment should ever be used. *Never* hit the pet, throw it on its back, shake it by the scruff, push the lips against the teeth forcefully, or use any other type of physical correction.

2. If you observe the pet doing something that is undesirable, interrupt the behavior in a manner that is sharp, startling, and strong enough to stop the undesirable behavior immediately without causing the puppy to be anxious.

3. After interrupting the undesirable behavior, you should guide your pet into the proper behavior and reward it immediately.

4. A leash and head halter can be used to guide the dog into position, and a release of pressure and positive reinforcement given for success (Figure 4.13).

5. If the undesirable behavior occurs when you cannot interrupt and guide your pet into the proper behavior, then you will need to look at ways to prevent the behavior occurring rather than punishing the behavior.