

HOW OFTEN DO I NEED TO REWARD MY DOG?



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My answer is **often** if you want good behaviours. All dogs learn by having their behaviours reinforced. Our goal as dog parents and trainers is to be in charge of these “reinforcers,” but this is often hard to do because we cannot control the environment. What we call distractions are actually attractions to your dog. When training, you need to have high-quality rewards that your dog values. The frequency with which you deliver these rewards is also extremely important; this is called a high rate of reinforcement. We all want a well-behaved dog who walks politely on leash, has a good recall, sits nicely to greet people, and doesn’t counter-surf, attention bark, or nip. But giving your dog one cookie a day for a nice sit is not enough to get the dog of your dreams.

Reward Your Dog for Not Being a Jerk

Humans tend to focus on the negative. Only after the dog jumps on us, lunges, or barks do we give her attention. Every time your dog has a chance to do these behaviours, they become stronger. However, it can seem impossible to get your dog to focus on you in a high-distraction environment. Sometimes you need to temporarily lower the bar and simply reward your dog for not being a jerk. To me, “not being a jerk” means the dog has all four paws on the ground and is not barking, lunging, biting, or pulling like crazy.

In a difficult environment you may need to reward your dog as often as every two to three seconds (if you’re faster than that, I applaud you!), which is about 20–30 times per minute! That’s a lot of rewarding. This frequency surprises most people, but think of it this way: if you are not reinforcing your dog the environment will; for example, your dog will likely pull toward the other dogs and start barking in less than a second if you give him the chance.

The purpose of training is to gradually raise the bar. Once you get to where you want to be, then you can start rewarding the dog less often and make it more difficult for her, for example by rewarding only after eye contact or asking her to do familiar behaviours. Be mindful though, if your dog starts to be less cooperative, you need to make it easier again.

I Don’t Want to Be Just a Walking Meatball to My Dog!

Neither do I, and this is where the mechanical skills of training come into play. Dogs are very smart, and they quickly figure out that food means they are being good. However, they will quickly find something more interesting to do as soon as the meatballs are out of sight. And so, the reward is delivered as a consequence of good behaviours, not as a bribe.

You should hide the food in your pocket and not dangle it in front of the dog’s nose. You should also pick a marker signal that will tell your dog “that’s what I want,” and you should only put your hand in your pocket after you have given your dog that signal. You can use the word “yes” or “good” or a clicker. This approach makes training a two-way street: the dog knows he has to do something for

you, and doing that behaviour makes you mark it and put your hand in your pocket. You establish the rules and both parties win!

You need to treat often and quickly, but that doesn’t mean you need to have an overabundance of tasty treats in your pocket. Instead of being the meatball itself, be a cunning meatball dispenser and make your dog work for her food – no need for food bowls for a while!

Rewards Other than Food?

I love using a variety of reinforcements. However, the challenge is dispensing them quickly. When you are teaching new behaviours, you need to dispense those 20 rewards a minute, and food is by far the best choice because it is the fastest to dispense. Once your training progresses, you can start switching to things like a game of tug or tossing a ball (excellent for practising recall). Our everyday life is also full of environmental rewards that we can harness to reinforce good behaviours. Getting out of the door to go for a walk, hopping in and out of the car, sniffing the ground, being allowed to run off leash, and greeting a dog friend are just a few examples of environmental rewards that most dogs love, so take advantage of them. The more often you use these, the better behaved your dog will be.

Don’t be afraid to reward your dog abundantly and frequently – before he gets into mischief! Whenever you catch your dog doing something you like – whether it’s laying down beside the couch or kitchen counter, checking in with you on walks, being quiet in his crate, greeting you with four paws on the ground, walking beside you on a loose leash – reward him! Your dog will start doing what you want much faster.