

ASK THE TRAINER



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Treats for Training: Use Them or Lose Them?

As a dog trainer, I believe that using treats for training is one of the most efficient ways to reinforce desired behaviours. How you use them matters. Also, I often get asked the questions “When do I stop using treats and is using human food as treats bad for my dog?”

Does your dog only perform a behaviour if they know that you have a treat? If yes, this is often the result of a training technique called luring. Luring is when you move the treat in front of your dog’s nose to manipulate your dog until you get the desired behaviour and then give the dog the treat. For example, for sit, you would move the treat above your dog’s nose until the dog’s bum hits the floor and then treat. If you only use this technique then your dog will become dependant on the treat for a sit.

Luring can be effective if you fade the lure as quickly as possible. To do this, have a treat in both hands. Lure your dog into a sit by holding the treat in one of your hands over his nose, and then reinforce using the treat from the other hand only. Eventually you can remove the treat from the luring hand and continue to treat from the other hand.

You can also teach your dog a reward marker. It’s a signal that lets your dog know that he made the right choice. A clicker or the word “yes” make good markers. When your puppy is paying



attention to you, pair your reward marker with a treat.

Your dog will soon learn that when they hear the reward marker they’ve earned a treat. The treat comes after the behaviour.

You should also hide treats. Either keep them in a bait bag or in a bowl on the counter but in easy reach.

If you are using a treat as a reinforcer (which is anything your dog likes and will work to get), the best way to use it is to go from a continuous schedule of reinforcement, which means that every desired response is reinforced (one sit = one treat), to a random or variable schedule of reinforcement, which means reinforcing desired behaviours after varying numbers of correct responses (1 sit = 1 treat, 3 sits = 1 treat, 5 sits = 1 treat, 2 sits = 1 treat).

While we’ll only be covering treats here, it is good to vary your reinforcers. Here are some examples, but remember it has to be something your dog will work for: toys, games, belly rubs, access to other dogs, and praise. Make a list of your dog’s reinforcers and vary them.

Treats should only compose 10% of your dog’s daily food ration, and they

should only be about the size of a pea. That way you’ll have a lot to work with during training sessions.

I always keep treats around. I keep them in my pocket, in little containers around the house, and in the car. I never know when there is going to be a rewardable moment, and I like to be prepared. I never take my dog’s good behaviours for granted. I always use treats for recalls when we are out in the park.

If you read the list of ingredients on your dog’s food bag, you’ll see that it is made of “human” food. It is important to make sure that your dog is getting a balanced diet and that it comes primarily from your dog’s food. Some human food is bad for dogs, like chocolate, grapes, raisins, cooked meat bones, avocados, and some nuts. People will often use leftover meat as treats. Lean meats with no spices are okay in small amounts. Do not feed from the table though, as it will promote begging.

I use pumpkin, apples, carrots, lean meats, lean cheeses, and peanut butter as treats for my dogs. I’ll even smear peanut butter on my skin to teach dogs to give kisses.

So in conclusion, keep the treats coming and happy training!