

## WHEN CAN I LEAVE FOOD AWAY FROM TRAINING? NEVER.



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Or let me put it this way: why would you want to?

When to stop giving food rewards is one of the questions I get asked most often. One of the benefits of clicker training is that once a behaviour is solidly trained, you can wean the food away. First you're a vending machine, but then you will become a slot machine. If your dog never knows when the reward is coming, he will always keep trying.

While this is true, I don't agree with training without any rewards. Many people likely feel the need to get rid of food in training because of the old-school training model that advocates that the dog should just do behaviours because we tell him to. But is using food in training a sign a weakness? If we don't get rid of food does it mean that we are bad dog owners who can't get our dogs to obey us?

The answer is no. Trainers often talk about how dogs are opportunistic, selfish creatures who don't do anything for us out of courtesy. They will do whatever they find most reinforcing for them at a particular moment in time. Period. It has nothing to do with us. As Steve White says: What we humans see as distractions, dogs see as reinforcements.

The smells out in the world (oh boy, my life with an intact male dog is ALL about the smells), other dogs, squirrels, raccoons, cats – we all know how annoying these distractions can be. If we decide to abandon the reinforcements that we can fill our pockets with, how can we ever compete with environmental reinforcements? Us humans are cunning though, so we can also take advantage of these environmental rewards. In exchange for polite behaviours, we can allow our dogs to go investigate all of this stuff. But as most of us know, it is not always that easy to do.

Let's say you happen to have your dog off-leash and a cat suddenly appears from around the corner or raccoons are all over the place. If you don't have something of great value in your pocket when you need it, the behaviours that you have spent so much time working on will start to fade away. This is the slot machine part. What this means is that you need to have the reinforcement handy exactly when you need it.

How many of us cannot go anywhere without bringing our cell phone? It's not like we need it every time, but what if there is an important phone call or message? How about driving a car without the spare tire? We rarely need it, but when you have a flat tire you're sure grateful to have a spare. A similar principle applies to our life with dogs.

If you have a reactive dog, you're probably used to rewarding those auto-watches – when your dog sees anything suspicious in the environment and turns to look at you in expectation of a treat – that your dog offers you. True, you don't need to reward the behaviour every single time after systematic groundwork, but

when there is environmental mayhem and your dog chooses to look at you instead of the stimulus that his every instinct is screaming at him to go after, you'd better have a reward handy or your good-dog-behaviour bank account is going to go into a huge overdraft! Personally, I hate when this happens to me. Therefore, I always have a tasty reward in my pocket when I go outside with my dog.

However, there are some behaviours that I always reward my dog for:

- Recall
- Drop, when my dog drops something out of his mouth, be it a toy or something icky
- Not barking at the neighbourhood nemesis in the dark
- Going out the gate of the dog park
- Leashing my dog up after off-leash time

There are many rewards, but food is just so convenient! It fits in your pocket, dogs love it, and you can deliver it rapidly and several times in a row if required. I'm happily admitting it: I will never stop using food as a reinforcement with my dogs no matter how old they are! And I must say I have absolutely no problem with that.

