

REWARD-BASED TRAINING

WHAT IS REWARD BASED TRAINING?

Often referred to as “positive reinforcement training,” reward-based training is exactly what it sounds like. It involves teaching your dog to offer the behaviors you like by rewarding those behaviors with things your dog likes and/or associating scary things with good things to make them less scary. Reward-based training is an incredibly effective way to train dogs and modify their behavior and is supported by well-established scientific principles and many years of real-life training with dogs and other species.

Dogs find many things rewarding:

- Food
- Social time with people and other animals
- Games & play
- Toys
- Instinctual behaviors (digging, chasing, barking, etc.)
- Freedom and choice

Behavior that gets rewarded gets repeated.

BENEFITS OF REWARD-BASED TRAINING

- It is effective and fun.
- It increases communication between you and your dog.
- It builds trust between you and your dog.
- It considers the emotional state of the dog and the effect of emotions on behavior.
- It can be successfully used for basic house manners, obedience, tricks, agility, and more!

DRAWBACKS OF REWARD-BASED TRAINING

There really aren't any. It's a myth that training with food and toys is a “bribe” and your dog won't be able to listen and obey without food or toys present. This method of training rewards dogs frequently when behaviors are new, then slowly weans them off the need for immediate reinforcement as they become proficient at behaviors. Think of it like a kindergartener who needs a sticker for every assignment but then moves through school and graduates until eventually he's in the working world where he works for a periodic paycheck.

SHOULD YOU EVER PUNISH?

No training method is entirely without punishment. Ignoring the dog (when he jumps on you), sending him to his crate for a short “time out” and not delivering an anticipated treat are all punishments, albeit very mild ones. Our experience at the Richmond SPCA suggests that virtually all behaviors can be successfully taught or modified without the need for physical punishment at all, so all training is done with that in mind. The criteria for what training techniques to use should start with the question: Will this cause fear, pain, or harm to the animal? Proceed if the answer is no.

Note that dogs do what works to get what they want – fun, food, comfort, companionship, etc. If their people learn how to use this fact to their advantage (i.e. control all the resources), training a dog can be simple and fun!