



BEHAVIOR
SERIES

Positive Reinforcement

Training Your Dog (or Cat!) with Treats and Praise

WE ALL LIKE TO BE PRAISED rather than punished. The same is true for your pet, and that's the theory behind positive reinforcement. Positive reinforcement means giving your pet something pleasant or rewarding immediately after she does something you want her to do. Because your praise or reward makes her more likely to repeat that behavior in the future, it is one of your most powerful tools for shaping or changing your pet's behavior.

Correct timing is essential when using positive reinforcement. The reward must occur immediately—within seconds—or your pet may not associate it with the proper action. For example, if you have your dog “sit” but reward her after she’s already stood back up, she’ll think she’s being rewarded for standing up.

Consistency is also essential. Everyone in the family should use the same commands. It might help to post these where everyone can become familiar with them. The most commonly used commands for dogs are:

- “Sit”
- “Stay”
- “Down” (which means “lie down”)
- “Off” (which means “get off of me” or “get off the furniture”)
- “Stand”
- “Come”
- “Heel” (or “let’s go” or “with me”)
- “Leave it”
- “Settle”
- “Watch me”

Consistency means always rewarding the desired behavior and never rewarding undesired behavior.

Using Positive Reinforcement

For your pet, positive reinforcement may include food treats, praise, petting, or a favorite toy or game. Food treats work especially well for training your dog. A treat should be enticing and irresistible to your pet. It should be a very small, soft piece of food, so that she will immediately gulp it down and look to you for more. If you give her something she has to chew or that breaks into bits and falls on the floor, she’ll be looking around the floor, not at you. Small pieces of soft commercial treats, hot dogs, cheese, or cooked chicken or beef have all proven successful. Experiment to see what works best for your pet. You can carry the treats in a pocket or fanny pack. Each time you use a food reward, you should couple it with a verbal reward (praise). Say something like, “Good dog,” in a positive, happy tone of voice.

Some pets may not be interested in food treats. For those pets, the reward could be in the form of a toy or brief play.

continued on reverse side

Beartooth Humane Alliance
PO Box 853
Red Lodge, MT 59068
(406)672-6960
info@beartoothhumane.org
www.beartoothhumane.org