

Using Rewards Effectively- Removing the Mark and Moving to a Variable Reinforcement Schedule

“A reward is only effective if the receiver of the reward finds it reinforcing. Value is not established by the giver, but by the receiver.”

In Puppy/Beginner, you learned about marking and rewarding as well as the power of rewards, so now it is time to learn the next steps.

Here at PetSmart, we utilize reward-based training to effectively build a relationship between you and your dog while ensuring that we are correctly communicating appropriate behaviors. Per the rules of Operant Conditioning, any behavior reinforced will be repeated. As we start working on more complex behaviors, with bigger distractions in upper level classes, it is important to keep in mind that what we have to offer our dogs must be competitive with the temptations of the environment. Is the liver in your pouch more enticing than the squeaky toy? Is the tug toy more interesting than the dog next to you? If it is not, then we have two options: we can change the reinforcer we offer to our dog to better compete with the distractions, either by rewarding more often or with something of higher value, or in a situation where a higher value reward is not available, we can decrease the stress of a distraction by adding distance or lowering the intensity of the distraction. If we consistently reward the dog for a specific behavior, not only will it be repeated, but it can be shaped into something more predictable and reliable.

Remember, if you mark, YOU MUST PAY. The marker is a promise. Once the behavior is established, meaning your dog can perform it correctly 80 to 90% of the time and in different locations, you will simply stop marking it. This DOES NOT mean that you stop rewarding your dog, rather you'll replace the mark with praise and continue offering a variety of rewards. It is important to randomize your rewards at this point, meaning you may offer a treat one time, then maybe offer a great massage or a great game of chase. Rewards can also be access to a privilege, like sniffing a bush or going out the front door for a walk. These are called life rewards and they are great reinforcers. Keep in mind, you must be able to control access to these privileges for them to work as rewards. If a dog is allowed to sniff every bush on walks, it wouldn't work as a great reward.

Once you have established that a behavior is trained, you have stopped marking and moved to randomizing rewards, your next step is to move to a Variable Reinforcement Schedule, meaning you will not reward your dog after every single behavior. Think about humans and gambling. Gambling is a perfect example of a Variable Reinforcement Schedule. You won't win every time; however, you can quickly become addicted with the intermittent winning and it drives you to try again and again. Dogs work the same way. Sometimes winning can drive a dog to keep trying harder to get to that “jackpot”. Keep in mind, when you first move to a Variable Reinforcement Schedule, you must reward more times than not, to keep your dog in the game. For the times you choose to not reward, it is still recommended to verbally praise your dog.

While the experience of consistently rewarding behaviors for reinforcement works at the Puppy/Beginner level, in Intermediate, with behaviors your dog already knows, we are trying to increase

the ratio of behaviors to reinforcement. For example, request two to three behaviors before offering a reward. We can still utilize combination behaviors to foster the fading of the reinforcers with established behaviors, but the value of the reinforcer may need to increase as the distractions increase. An alternate option is to increase the proximity of that distraction to achieve success and then decrease it gradually.

Now that you know more about the next steps of reward-based training, let's take a closer look at effective rewards for the Intermediate class.

What is a Reward?

A reward is anything that **the dog** enjoys and is willing to work for.

Value is in the Eye of the Beholder

Remember, a reward is unique to the individual and can be specific to the environment. While one dog may like being pet, another may find physical affection aversive. While Alex enjoys playing tug at home, he has no interest in playing tug while in the store. Sparky loves peanut butter, Mira prefers cheese, and Gus only eats chicken. Now what if during Intermediate, when faced with a tennis ball as a distraction, Gus is no longer interested in the chicken. The problem that arises is not that the chicken loses value, but that Gus deems the ball more valuable, in that moment. He didn't stop liking chicken, he just found the ball to be worthier of his attention. To put this into a more human perspective, the chicken is worth \$25, and the ball is worth \$100. Which would you choose to work for? For other pets, those values may be reversed. To ensure Gus focuses on us, we either need something more valuable to him than that tennis ball, or we need to increase the distance between us and the ball.

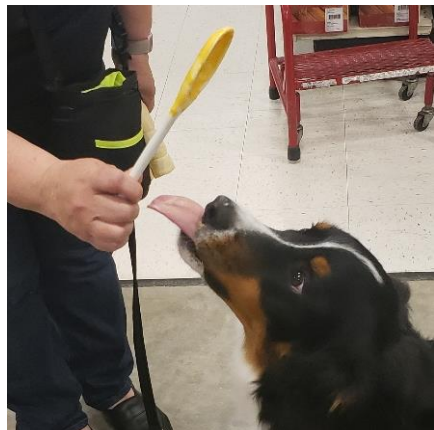
Your challenge is to discover multiple rewards that you can utilize while working with your dogs. Dogs have the ability to develop preferences, so find out what your dog's preference is. Dogs are diverse and unique just like us, and we need accommodate that. Consider your response if your next paycheck came in Monopoly money instead of actual currency. Would that be acceptable to you?

Variety is the spice of life, and not everybody likes the same mixture. In order to keep your dog engaged and a willing participant it helps to be less predictable, in a sense. While a routine is good for dogs to understand the rules in the home, in training the patterns can become boring. Have your dog do one behavior and sometimes give one treat and sometimes give five. Or sometimes ask your dog to do three behaviors and give them one really big treat. The point is the routine is not predictable at all, other than reinforcement will come eventually if they stick with it. The trick is remembering that variety needs to come from both sides, both behavior and reinforcement; like a seesaw. When we always ask for a sit and then a shake and then give a treat, that pattern is now expected.

Value of Food Rewards



Consider making a “trail mix” of coveted treats. Avoid using the same reward every time. Much like humans, no matter the value of the reward, the dog will often get bored with the same thing every time. Imagine the best steak you’ve ever eaten. Now imagine eating nothing but that same steak every meal, every day, for a year. Eventually, you would tire of it. Instead of utilizing the same treat, each reward your dog gets has the potential to be something different. This will help inspire him to work longer and harder to receive the next great treat. A great cost/calorie saving method is to add some kibble to the mix. Occasionally he will receive kibble, and the rest of the time he’ll receive something amazing. It will also increase the scent value of the kibble.



KONG Paste, Easy Cheese, or Peanut Butter spread on a plastic spoon is a high value reward for many, that can help fine tune your Heel position. You may have to teach the dog how to gently lick the spoon, but most will quickly figure out the game.

While working your Heel, the spoon allows you to more quickly reinforce the correct behavior and move on. It is also extremely beneficial for taller humans with shorter dogs. The treat is delivered closer to the dog without the pet parent having to bend over quite as much which helps alleviate jumping.

Toys

Some dogs really like toys. Toys can be a fantastic reward for your dog, especially if he enjoys a good game of tug or a rousing game of fetch. Remember, for a toy to be effective as a reinforcer, your dog must actually have the opportunity to play with the toy. You can not simply use it as a lure or repeatedly offer it with no pay off. This will only decrease its value and teach your dog not to work for it.

Life Rewards

Remember “Grandma’s Law”. You must first finish your veggies, then you will receive dessert. For example, your dog must first sit, then he may exit the back door. Your dog must return the ball to you, then you will throw it again. Your dog must calmly sit and stay, then you will connect his leash to go for a walk.

You can use a more probable behavior to reinforce a less probable behavior. Simply put, ask your dog to earn the things he’s receiving in his life: Remember that food is not the only thing rewarding to your dog. I personally enjoy a burger from McDonalds every now and then, but that doesn’t mean that a burger is the only thing I can get happiness from. Ask your dog to earn things he’s already receiving in his life: Sit before being fed, wait at the doors to go outside and play, or down/stay before being leashed for a walk. The more he learns to politely ask for things he wants to do, the more the communication door opens.

Remember, you wouldn’t work for monopoly money, so make sure you are offering your dog something he values.

In the words of Patricia McConnell “**Behavior is expensive**” and while you’re establishing expectations, it is important that you can afford what you’re asking for.