

## Fading Treats

Many people believe that when you use treats to train a dog you'll never get a reliable response without them. This is in fact true with programs that do not teach the client how to fade the treats while maintaining reliable responses.

Training treats are a temporary training tool to be used properly then put away. Remember, any tool is only as good as the person using it. Imagine you're building a table using screws and a drill. If you put the drill away before the last leg is secure your table will fall over. However, once your table is secured you'll no longer need the drill. If a leg comes loose, you'll bring the tool back out to tighten the leg then put it away again.

We'll use training treats to motivate the dog, create and polish behaviours, put behaviours on cue, and reward correct responses. Then we'll fade the training treats using schedules of reinforcement, an exercise designed to get the treats off your body, and replace many of them with valued rewards such as attention, praise, walks, car rides, games, etc.

Some owners want their dogs to respond to cues out of respect without any type of motivation, but this type of response only comes from intimidation and fear. The truth is that anything with a brain – animal or human – requires motivation. Ask yourself, would you continue to go to work if they stopped paying you? Also ask yourself what type of relationship you want with your dog. Do you want respect based on fear or trust? There are many ways to motivate and reward your dog and food is only one of them. Once your dog is trained, you'll not require food to get a response but can instead motivate and reward your dog with other things it values. (See *"The Resource as the Reward – Shaping Canine Behaviours without Treats or Domination by Greg Ceci"* on page 5)

Used properly, food rewards, also called training treats, serve the following purposes:

- To motivate your dog to think and make choices
- To lure your dog's body preventing the need for physical force or manipulation
- To reinforce the desired behaviour making it more likely your dog will repeat the behaviour and understand the meaning of the cue

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Once your dog understands each cue and signal we'll take the following steps to fade the training treats.

### 1. More for Less

Ask for two, then three, four responses, etc. for one treat. Asking your dog to work harder for each treat is the first step to eliminating your treats from training.



Norma Jeanne teaches Rain to wave at 8 wks of age

### 2. Intermittent Reinforcement

B.F. Skinner's theory on operant conditioning and behaviourism states, "if you reinforce the dog only part of the time when it offers the desired behaviour you can reduce the number of reinforcements necessary to maintain the desired response."

It works like slot machines that are programmed by psychologists to only reward you enough to keep you pulling the lever. If the dog knows a reward is coming but doesn't know when, it will keep offering the behaviour until it receives the reward. This is why a dog that is occasionally rewarded for begging at the table continues to beg. Intermittent reinforcement is a powerful tool to use when eliminating the treats in training. However, if you don't reward the dog often enough to keep it playing your game the behaviour will fade.

We'll begin by asking for more responses for each food treat, requiring the dog to work harder for its rewards. We'll reinforce the behaviour intermittently meaning the dog knows the treat is coming – it just doesn't know when. The dog keeps offering the behaviour in anticipation of the eventual reward. Like the slot machine, the secret to rewarding intermittently is to only reward the dog often enough to keep the dog playing your game.

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### 3. Remove the Treats from your Body

Next, we'll remove the treats from our body so our dog's response doesn't depend on the presence of food.

Begin this exercise beside a counter. Put five treats in each hand and the rest on the counter.

#### **Exercise**

##### Step One

Give your cue and signal for sit. The moment your dog's rear end hits the ground give your "YES!" reward marker. Give it a treat then release your dog. Repeat five times.

##### Step Two

Immediately show your dog that the signal hand is now empty and without hesitation give another cue and signal to "sit". If it responds give your "YES!" reward marker and give it the treat from your left hand. Repeat five times.

Your dog may hesitate at first because it doesn't see a treat. If it hesitates, repeat your signal but not your cue because if you want your dog to respond the first time you give a cue you must not repeat it. If at any time your dog chooses not to respond – release it using the release cue you created for your "stay" and start again at step one.

##### Step Three

Now both of your hands will be empty. Immediately show your dog both empty hands and without hesitation give another cue and signal to "sit". If it responds give your "YES!" reward marker and give it a treat from the counter. Repeat five times.

##### Step Four

Take two steps away from your counter and repeat your cue and signal to "sit". When your dog responds give your reward marker then go to the counter to get a treat.

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### Step Five

Take four steps away from your counter and repeat step five.

### Step Six

Move a couple steps further away from the counter each time so that eventually, you can give a cue and signal in your basement or back yard then go to the kitchen for a treat.

Now you can follow the same steps using your “down” cue and gradually repeat the exercise with all your various cues and signals.

Once you’ve accomplished this, your dog will no longer require the presence of food to respond to cues and signals but remember – your dog will still require some form of motivation to respond to you and the higher the distraction, the better the motivation will have to be.

Although training your dog is easy, distraction training is not. This is why advanced training includes distraction training. Although your dog may be able to respond reliably to cues and signals with no distraction, changing location or anything in your environment can make it difficult for your dog to focus and make correct choices. For example, although most dogs respond reliably to the recall in my classroom setting, they may not respond while playing with the other dogs. This needs to be taught. Set yourself up for success by only asking your dog to do what it’s capable of based on how its feeling and what’s going on in the environment. Start working in areas of low distraction and gradually build the intensity of the distraction, as your dog is successful. Just like building your dog’s focus when teaching a “watch me” or a lengthy “stay” it’s important to always let your dog set the pace - meaning you only increase your expectations a small amount when your dog is very comfortable with your last criteria.

#### 4. Replace Food with Other Resources

At this point we can gradually replace the food rewards with other resources that are valuable to your dog, things it will receive daily anyway such as meals, walks, car rides, games, toys, safe bones, cuddle time, attention, off leash play and play with doggy friends. Other things your dog should earn is putting the leash on, taking it off, jumping into your vehicle, being invited out of your vehicle, etc.

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Maintaining a reliable response to your cues will not be difficult if you use other resources on a daily basis. If your dog gets a treat every time it responds to a cue, it will quickly learn to search for the treat before deciding whether or not to respond. No treat – no response.

Once you're maintaining reliable responses to a particular cue, you can use these valued resources as rewards instead of food. By doing so, you'll create a habit of training numerous times per day but you will also be doing so most of the time without the use of treats. (See "*Resource Control*" handout)

Training with treats is simply the quickest, easiest, most positive and effective way to teach a new behaviour, strengthen a weak one, or shape behaviour into a polished performance.



Complements of Janet Greenwood, CTB.ccs

### **The Resource as the Reward – Shaping Canine Behaviours without Treats or Domination by Greg Ceci, IPDTA-CDT**

One of the arguments posed by dominance and compulsion trainers against positive reinforcement dog training is that the dog becomes too reliant on treats. The reality is that treats are merely one of many valued resources to a dog.

The use of resources in training including treats quickly strengthens the trust between humans and dogs, while dominance or correction based training erodes that trust - and a combination of both simply confuses the dog. This confusion leads to an increase in stress and anxiety for the dog, which in turn often manifests in other problematic issues, increased handler frustration and more corrections.

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At the end of all canine behaviour whether wanted or unwanted is a resource – and dogs will continue to do whatever works to get it. Dogs don't work for free and in most situations, treats are actually pretty low in value on the canine resource list – would you continue to go to work if you didn't receive a paycheck and were punished for all your mistakes?

Dogs are social animals and love to be around family members. As a result, attention from humans is a very potent resource. Dogs also love to be around their own kind if properly socialized, leading to the conclusion that playtime and socialization with other dogs is yet another significant resource.

Dogs also know the difference between a human and a dog, which is one reason the pack leader-alpha dog-dominance approach erodes the human-canine trust bond. There is a huge difference in a dog's mind between a correction from another dog and a correction from a human.

We all know that dogs require daily exercise making it easy to surmise that walks and exercise are highly valued resources, while letting a dog off leash becomes the most valued resource of all. Once off leash, many dogs become uninterested in treats – all the more reason to use off leash time as a reward. Many dogs will lead if given the choice but prefer to follow a benign leader, not a leader that dominates and intimidates. Ask yourself what kind of leader you'd rather follow?

There's no disputing that food is a resource but so are toys, games and playtime with the handler. In fact, I once successfully treated a severe case of aggressive bullying with a tennis ball and a game of fetch. To that particular dog, the tennis ball, the game and ultimately my positive attention were of higher value than the other dogs. So you see it's simply about finding your dog's currency.

When humans consistently control the resources, they control the behaviours, which in turn control the dog. Dominance has nothing to do with it. In fact, the corrections associated with dominance-based training are counter-productive. These corrections give much valued attention to the very behaviours you wish to extinguish. If dog training is teaching a dog what you'd like it to do, then corrections are not dog training. The only lesson a dog learns through corrections and aversive techniques is to fear the reprimand and quite often the handler – they don't learn to choose the correct behaviour. It's easy to infer that dominance based methods simply create avoidance behaviours and avoidance behaviours are tenuous at best.

Every dog has one resource it will do just about anything to get. My youngest dog is not food motivated, but loves my attention and kisses on her muzzle – that's her currency. Luckily, I have an endless supply.

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Based on my experience, I've created a short list of resources in order of importance to most dogs. It is by no means an exhaustive list, but covers all the most common resource categories. Again, each dog is unique so the list may vary. There are also resources within resources.

For example: When my dogs are off leash (primary resource) and we're approaching a body of water (secondary resource), they know they must sit and wait for a release cue to go play in the water. Or, if we're approaching other dogs off leash, they must sit and wait for a "Say Hi" cue. The lesson here is to look for the secondary resources within the primary resource in order to establish superior self-control in your dogs.

Make your own list and rank the resources in order of importance to your dog, but remember once you make the list it's not carved in stone – you can change and rearrange it as you continue to build trust and learn more about what drives your dog. Even if food were higher on the list for your dog, why wouldn't you utilize it along with all resources to control and shape your dog's behaviour? By identifying your dog's valued resources, you can rotate the resource used as the reward to avoid creating a dependency on any one of them.

### Resources:

1. Off leash play and exercise
2. Socialization / playtime with other dogs
3. Playtime with favourite toys and / or human handlers
4. General attention from humans
5. Food (including treats)
6. On leash exercise

Remember, it's all about finding your dog's currency and using that currency to shape desired behaviours in a respectful and humane manner. Be a benevolent leader and your dog will respect you – a respect based on trust.

### References

- Dr. Ian Dunbar, Basic Training Video Series, TVS Television, 1992  
Dr. Ian Dunbar, Seminar notes Puppy Training 1990