



True North Training

Ask The Trainer: Treats As Training Rewards

QUESTION:

I'm concerned that using treats to train my dog will ruin our relationship and result in a dog who is only interested in getting treats. Right now, when my dog does what I ask her to do, I give her a kiss on the forehead. She seems to like that. Why does my trainer keep pushing me to use treats for training?

ANSWER:

I can't put words in your trainer's mouth, but I can explain why I myself often use treats in training!

First it's important to remember that training a dog involves lots of repetition. That seems obvious, but it is often the necessary practice reps that seem to get us down! Getting the dog to practice with us while we try to teach things like sitting, lying down, coming when called, or walking politely on a leash isn't always the easiest thing: there's a lot out there in the world to distract both the human and the dog. And then, there's the question of consistency. If we want the dog to sit immediately after we say the word, "Sit," we have to practice exactly that: sitting, *immediately* after we say "Sit." If we're trying to practice "Sit" outdoors, or when there is a squirrel in sight, it gets more difficult. Until the dog is well trained, those settings conspire against us---either the dog ignores us completely, or sits, but only after we repeat the command twelve times getting louder each time! Sadly, mere practice does not make perfect. Instead, *perfect practice* makes perfect! And perfect practice isn't as easy to achieve as we might hope.

I can almost hear your objection: "But I don't want my dog to sit because I have a treat in my hand! I want my dog to sit because I say so!"

I'm with you there! But while you are teaching her to sit on command, you need some help, in

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the form of a reward. Something that is important enough *to her* that she is able to put her desire for that squirrel aside, and pay attention to what the two of you are doing together. Because (here is another important thing to remember): behavior that gets rewarded, gets repeated.

Now: are treats the only way to reward your dog? Of course not. Your dog probably wants different things at different times and in different situations. And part of good training involves teaching your dog that, not only can you hand out good things to eat if she cooperates, but you also give other rewards. Some other possible rewards for successful practice might include: a short game of tug, or fetch (if your dog enjoys these games); the chance to greet another dog, or a human passer-by; getting fed (you can for example tell your dog to sit while you put down her food bowl, then release her to eat dinner); going outdoors to potty; going for a ride in the car; going in the gate at the dog park; etc. etc. etc.

Treats are easy and effective to use in training because (a) most dogs enjoy them enough to work for a treat in less-than-perfect settings; (b) they are quickly eaten by the dog so you can reward her and then immediately do another practice rep; (c) you can vary them easily (so your dog won't get satiated with just one type of treat); and (d) they are easy to "plant" in hidden spots on your chosen practice ground, so you can practice without holding treats in your hands, while still "magically" delivering them to your dog after a successful practice rep. But I would never tell someone to only use treats in training. Instead, I encourage people to use any reward that their dog wants at any given moment. Just---don't arbitrarily deprive yourself of the advantage of using treats, either.

You may notice that some non-food rewards are only rewarding (to your dog) some of the time. If your dog has just pottied, then going outdoors to potty is not going to be particularly rewarding. If your dog isn't thirsty, then water is probably not much of a reward. If your dog wants to chase that squirrel, then I'm sorry, but that kiss on the forehead isn't going to cut it, but a vigorous game of tug, or a ride in the car, just might.

Using non-food rewards does require alertness to the situation and to your dog's probable inclinations, and they tend to take longer to deliver (so you may not get in as many practice reps when using them). Still---as a trainer I encourage you to use non-food rewards as often as you can find ways to make them work for you. Your dog will be able to correctly respond to your commands in more situations if she has associated those commands with a variety of food and non-food rewards. Think about it. If the dog's experience contains the following rewards for sitting on command: really good treats; games of tug or fetch; the chance to feel better by relieving herself outdoors; going for a ride in the car; going for a walk; a drink of water when she's thirsty; getting breakfast and dinner: how likely is it that your dog will come to perceive "Sit" as an opportunity to get something she wants? And the same is true of the other obedience commands you want your dog to learn.

Using treats in training is not bribery. Bribery is when you offer the treat **BEFORE** the behavior (or the practice attempt). That sets up a situation where the dog knows exactly what is on

offer, so the dog can decide: “No, today I don’t care about that dog biscuit.”

Reward is inherently different: the dog, from experience, knows that she could get something she wants if she does the right thing. She doesn’t know what, exactly---it might be a piece of Pupperoni, or the chance to go for a ride in the car, or a game of tug, or a piece of hamburger--but in the past it’s been worth her time to try, so this time she tries again.

The fear about damaging the relationship is a harder one for many people to overcome. We all want our dogs to love us as much as we love them. And people who don’t believe in using treats for dogs are usually happy to say just how much damage treats can do. But relationships are built out of lots of small interactions. With your dog, your relationship is a lot bigger than just a few treats. It’s the cumulative thing: the sum of the times you feed and walk your dog; those cuddles on the couch; visits to the dog park or walking in the neighborhood; games you play together and times you share. Even visits to the vet. Making training sessions as easy and pleasant for the dog as possible, by using rewards that the dog clearly enjoys, is actually a relationship-builder!

Last but not least: a lot of the things we want our dogs to do “on command” can be thought of as the dog’s job. From the dog’s point of view, many if not most of these things are even counterintuitive! Dogs, left to themselves, do not behave like little four-legged humans. They learn a lot of what we want them to learn just because we want them to learn it---not because it makes sense to them! From this perspective, the rewards we give them can be viewed like the paycheck that we humans like to receive in return for our work. (And, if we didn’t get one in return for working, most likely we would go looking for a different job!) Our paychecks don’t damage our relationships with our bosses and coworkers, and using treats as part of a reward system in training your dog won’t damage that relationship either.

