

Frequently Asked Questions

Do I have to use food to train my dog?

You don't have to use any particular tool to train your dog. Professionals like food because it is one of the most powerful motivators in animal training. The reality is that you get more strongly conditioned behavior if you do not limit yourself to praise alone. Another advantage of food is that you can use it to target the dog into position. Food therefore has two roles: as target ("lure") and as reward. Training with positive reinforcement allows the dog to relax and learn, and strengthens the bond between you and the dog. Over time, you can expect "more for your money," that is more behaviors for fewer treats. You will also become skillful at incorporating other rewards into training.

Aren't I actually bribing my dog by luring him into position with a treat?

You can't bribe a dog for doing something he doesn't even yet have in his repertoire! Put yourself in his place. Imagine that someone said "palana." What would you do? Nothing, because you don't understand what that person wants you to do let alone why you should do it. Physically placing your dog into position slows down learning and has negative side effects. Using a target allows you to elegantly obtain the correct behavior.

Will I always have to food reward my dog?

Certainly not as frequently as for a newer behavior, but yes, maintenance of established behavior with (concealed) intermittent rewards is a must. There is no free lunch in behavior. Think of it this way: you have to feed your dog anyway. You can give it all to him for free in a bowl or you can reserve part of his daily caloric intake and make him earn it! Also, don't forget that there are other rewards besides food: everyday things such as play, sniffing, door opening, car rides and access to other dogs can also be used to reward established behavior.

Isn't crate training cruel?

A crate is a safe, comfortable place that most dogs voluntarily use when the door is left open. How might you treat an untrained human toddler when unsupervised? Would you consider it "cruel" to leave her in a crib and "kind" to let her wander around? Crating also prompts dogs to hold their bladder and bowels, facilitating housetraining.

I have heard that playing tug of war causes aggression. Is this true?

The only study ever done found no correlation between dogs that play tug and aggression. If you teach your dog to "take" and "out" on cue and cancel the game if he breaks one of these rules, there is no reason to deprive your dog of this fun and efficient energy burner. Tired dogs are well-behaved dogs. Fetch is another great game to play.

How long will it take to house-train my puppy?

Puppies don't hold on as well as adults. If you adhere to a strict schedule, taking them out many times a day, most puppies can be house-trained in a few weeks. Reward the puppy immediately when he eliminates outside with both verbal praise and a food treat. This means you must accompany him out, otherwise your reward will be too late. Confine the puppy to one puppy-proofed room and supervise him so there is no way he can make a mistake without you interrupting. When you see him winding up to eliminate, interrupt him and hustle him outside. Praise when he finishes here. When you can't supervise, crate him (up to an hour at a stretch - don't force him to soil his crate or else you lose its value as a housetraining tool). Don't punish accidents, especially after the fact. Late punishments, even a few seconds late, are not associated with previous behavior and are abusive.

My puppy keeps nipping me!! What should I do?

If you watch a litter of puppies playing, you'll notice that they spend most of their time biting each other. This is normal puppy behavior. When you take a puppy from a litter and into your home, he will start play-biting you.

A puppy has very sharp teeth but weak jaws. This means the puppy can cause pain when biting but cannot cause severe damage. An adult dog has duller teeth but a powerful jaw, capable of mutilating damage. It is therefore important to teach a puppy to control the force of his biting before teaching him to not play-bite at all. This way, he grows up conditioned with a softer mouth that is less likely to do damage if he should ever bite. This is known as "acquired bite inhibition," an important line of defense against aggression.

To teach bite inhibition, screech "ouch!" when the puppy play bites hard and then supply a brief time-out consequence. The message is: "if you bite hard, you are instantly alone." The best way to do a time-out is to get up abruptly and leave the confinement area. The time-out should be no more than one to two minutes long. Then go back to him and practice again. It will not work instantly but, over time, the puppy will start controlling both the force and the frequency of his biting. When he consistently bites softly, start re-directing him to his toys and timing him out for all bites to human flesh or clothing.