

Tips For Successful Training

1. Behaviour that is rewarded is more likely to re-occur

Dogs do what works for them. If your dog receives praise and a treat for sitting, she is more likely to sit the next time you ask. If she knows that jumping on you will earn your attention, she will keep jumping, as attention is rewarding to her. Remember that it is the outcome of a behaviour (the consequence) that drives the dog to do (or not do) things, not your commands or actions.

2. Dogs learn by association

When training, it is important that the reward closely follows the desired behaviour (within three seconds). For example: when teaching your dog to sit, the praise and treat should be given when her rear touches the floor, not after she's stood up again. On the other side of the coin, reprimanding your dog for something she may have done hours ago (e.g., you come home to find your slippers shredded) is pointless. Your dog won't associate your yelling with what she's done, and if it happens often enough, she may begin to fear your arrival home (that "guilty dog" look), as you are always angry for no reason she can fathom.

3. Reward behaviours you like

Most of us are so accustomed to noticing our dog's "mistakes" that it seems strange to begin noticing and rewarding "good" behaviour. For example: your dog barks, so you yell at her to be quiet. Sure, a barking dog is hard not to notice, but what about when she's lying calmly? Most of us never consider rewarding calm behaviour, so the dog only gets rewarded with our attention (even yelling is attention) when she is doing something inappropriate. Having been rewarded, of course she keeps doing those things! Make a habit of noticing and rewarding your dog for *good* behaviour.

4. Be clear and consistent

Ensure that you use the same clear signal each time you ask your dog to do something. If you change the word you use, the way you move your hand, or even change your tone of voice, your dog will become confused. Remember that dogs hear sounds, not words, and see movement, not signals – if you change these, they are no longer recognisable to her.

5. "Reward" is defined by the dog, not you

Just because you think those expensive new treats are a great reward doesn't mean they are. If your dog turns her nose up at them, they're not much of a reward in her mind. A reward can be a yummy treat, petting, verbal praise, a throw of the ball, a quick game with a favourite toy, sniffing grass, saying hello to another dog, etc. The sky's the limit. Consider what your dog *really* likes, and use it! Just like any employer, you need to hold up your end of the bargain by providing the reward your dog wants, not what suits you.

6. Find an alternate behaviour

When you want your dog to stop doing something, give her something else to do that is incompatible with the unwanted stuff. Try this: on a piece of paper, draw a vertical line down the centre. On the left, list all the things your dog does that you'd like her to stop doing. On the right, next to each behaviour, write down something you could give her to do instead. It's easy! The less she gets to practice the unwanted behaviour, the less she will think about doing it, and the good behaviour will become the new habit.

7. Raise criteria gradually.

Simply put, that means *don't expect too much too soon*. Instead, build small steps to get from Point A to Point B. Any time your dog does not perform an exercise correctly, consider whether you have proceeded too quickly. Go back to the point at which your dog was last successful, then build gradually. Setting your dog up to succeed eliminates the need for corrections.

8. If trained correctly, behaviour does NOT depend on food being present

This is something that many people who are opposed to food-reward training don't understand. If you phase treats out gradually and use lots of real-life rewards (petting, games, etc.) as well, your dog will do as asked even when no treats are present. Use a lot of treats at first to teach and practice new behaviours. Eventually, rewards can become fewer and farther between – but they should not stop altogether. You wouldn't want to stop getting paid once you got better at your job, so don't forget to reward for a job well done!

9. Be patient.

Don't expect miracles. Training takes time, patience and practice. Dogs go through developmental stages just like humans – you can't expect a lot of focus and impulse control from a puppy, and you have to be extra patient and determined during the often difficult 6 – 18 months adolescent stage. Most dogs, if the work is put into them as youngsters, become much more responsible and compliant with maturity and experience, but that doesn't happen overnight or without effort on your part. Look after your relationship, be fair and consistent, and don't let bad habits get started, and you will find yourself with a pretty good dog in time.

10. Most important point: HAVE FUN!!!!

If either you or your dog are not having fun during a training session, STOP. If you are grumpy, frustrated, upset, or unconfident, or your dog is disinterested, too distracted, anxious, or confused, you are doing more harm than good by continuing. If this is a common problem for you, seek help – it shouldn't be this way, even with the most difficult dog.

Don't put pressure on yourself or your dog. Always give your dog the option to just walk away, and give yourself permission to stop at any time. Do whatever exercises you enjoy, and keep it really short, just a few minutes. Instead of setting up formal training sessions for yourself, look for training opportunities throughout the day – when on a walk, around your dog's meal times, when you are waiting for something, when you are playing with your dog. It doesn't even really matter what you do – silly tricks are just as beneficial as formal sits and stays to your relationship, communication skills, and building your dog's understanding and responsiveness.

Everybody enjoys different ways of doing things so do what works for you and your dog. If you are both happy, and you are making progress, then whatever you are doing is the right thing to do!