

Benefits of Using Positive Reinforcement to Train Your Dog

From Amy Bender, former About.com Contributing Writer

Using positive reinforcement to train your dog means you are rewarding the behaviors you like, and ignoring the behaviors you do not like. You can use treats, praise, or life rewards (i.e. games, walks, car rides) to reward your dog's good behavior. [Clicker training](#)¹ is one effective way of using positive reinforcement to train your dog, but it's possible to use rewards without the clicker. There are a number of benefits to training your dog with positive reinforcement:



Photo ©
iStockphoto.com/carebott

1. **Anyone can use positive reinforcement to train their dog.**

Positive reinforcement allows everyone in the family to get involved in training the dog. For instance, it may be dangerous to allow your child to use some methods of dog training, such as leash corrections and other forms of punishment. With positive reinforcement, however, you can hand your child a handful of [dog treats](#)². With your supervision, your child will be able to train your dog the same way you do. Positive reinforcement doesn't require you to speak in a strong tone of voice, rely on your strength, or put yourself or a family member in potential danger. Everyone in the family can get in on the act!

2. **It allows you to communicate clearly with your dog.**

Positive reinforcement allows you to communicate clearly with your dog. You decide what you want your dog to do, and let him know what you want by rewarding him when he does it. When you reward your dog for doing things correctly, he's more likely to repeat those good behaviors.

Punishment is not always so clear. For instance, we can look at a common problem that occurs when dogs are punished for [housebreaking](#)³ accidents. In this case, you catch your dog urinating on your carpet and you scold him or resort to the age-old trick of smacking him with a rolled up newspaper. Your intention is to tell your dog that it's not acceptable for him to eliminate inside your home. Instead, dogs often learn that it's not safe to eliminate when you are around. This is one of the reasons why you may find that your dog has accidents when left alone, but never seem to catch him in the act. There's definitely a communication problem here.

With positive reinforcement, you can avoid this confusion. Let's take a look at housebreaking again. You want to teach your dog to eliminate outside rather than in your home. Instead of punishing your dog, you'll reward the behavior you want - going to the bathroom outside. In this case, every time your dog eliminates outside, you give him lots of praise and treats. You can also reward him by giving him some playtime. Your dog quickly learns that good things happen when he relieves himself outside, while nothing happens when he goes indoors. Your dog will soon be eliminating outside in an effort to reap the rewards. You've managed to clearly communicate with your dog.

3. **Positive reinforcement can be used on a wide variety of behaviors.**

Using training methods such as leash corrections or other forms of punishment is not effective for every dog. In fact, in some cases, punishment can serve to make a behavior problem worse. [Aggressive dogs](#)⁴ are one example of this. Very often aggressive dogs become even more aggressive in the face of punishment. Fearful dogs also may not respond well to even the smallest punishment. A dog who is scared of certain people or situations may become even more fearful when punishment is used as a training method. However, clicker trainers have reported some great success with using positive reinforcement to train aggressive and fearful dogs.

4. The mental workout can burn off some of your dog's excess energy.

Boredom is a major factor in many of our dogs' common behavior problems⁵, such as digging and excessive chewing. Training is a great way to help keep boredom at bay. You may be surprised at how much energy your dog will burn off simply by adding a few short, positive training sessions to his day.

5. It's fun!

If you keep training sessions short and upbeat, positive reinforcement training can be fun for you and your dog. Once dogs recognize that training leads to lots of good things for them, many dogs begin to view training sessions as playtime. Your dog will soon be offering you good behaviors in the hopes of getting his rewards, and you're sure to get a smile out of his eagerness to learn.

6. It strengthens the bond between you and your dog.

For most of us, our dogs are our friends and companions. They become a part of our family. Positive reinforcement methods of training can help reinforce the bond⁶ we have with our dogs. While other training methods may teach your dog how to behave, positive reinforcement will help you lead your dog while maintaining his trust and strengthening your relationship.

Put yourself in your dog's place. Think about how you feel at work. If your boss asks you to do something, and follows it up by physically pushing you to get you to do what he asks and never gives you a thank you afterward, how are you going to feel about him? Now, what if instead, your boss asks you to do something, and as soon as you've completed your task, he rushes in to say thank you and tells you what a good job you're doing? Chances are you'll feel much more favorably towards the boss who rewards you than the one who punishes you. And you'll probably be willing to work harder for the boss who praises you, too.

The same is true with your dog. Your dog is much more likely to enjoy your company if he's looking forward to being rewarded rather than fearing punishment. So spending time on positive reinforcement methods of training is sure to strengthen your bond with your dog.

This About.com page has been optimized for print. To view this page in its original form, please visit:

http://dogs.about.com/od/dogtraining/a/positive_reinforcement.htm

©2011 About.com, Inc., a part of [The New York Times Company](#). All rights reserved.

Links in this article:

1. <http://dogs.about.com/od/dogtraining/qt/clickertraining.htm>
2. <http://dogs.about.com/od/nutrition/tp/Dog-Treat-Varieties.htm>
3. <http://dogs.about.com/od/dogtraining/qt/housebreaking.htm>
4. <http://dogs.about.com/od/dogtraining/a/aggression.htm>
5. <http://dogs.about.com/od/dogtraining/tp/behaviorproblems.htm>
6. http://dogs.about.com/od/caringfordogsandpuppies/qt/human_canine_bond.htm

If the dog is consistently failing to respond to commands, he may not have a firm understanding of what you're asking him to do yet. Go back a step and work on the commands in an area with little or no distraction for several training sessions. Once your dog understands what you're asking of him, you can try to incorporate training into a game again.

This About.com page has been optimized for print. To view this page in its original form, please visit: <http://dogs.about.com/od/dogtraining/a/How-to-Train-a-Dog-Using-Games.htm>

©2011 About.com, Inc., a part of [The New York Times Company](#). All rights reserved.

Links in this article:

1. http://dogs.about.com/od/dogtraining/a/positive_reinforcement.htm
2. http://dogs.about.com/od/dogtraining/tp/top_treats_for_training.htm
3. http://dogs.about.com/od/basiccommands/tp/top_basic_commands.htm
4. <http://dogs.about.com/od/funphotos/qt/tugowar.htm>
5. <http://dogs.about.com/od/basiccommands/ht/sitcommand.htm>
6. <http://dogs.about.com/od/basiccommands/ht/downcommand.htm>
7. <http://dogs.about.com/od/basiccommands/ht/dropitcommand.htm>

How To Train Your Dog to Come When Called

By Jenna Stregowski, RVT, About.com Guide

Teaching your dog to come to you when called is one of the most important basic commands. Once this command is mastered, you can protect him from a potentially dangerous situation by calling him to you. You can teach this command to a young puppy as soon as he learns his name.

Difficulty: Average

Time Required: 5-10 minutes, 2-3 times per day

Here's How:

1. Start indoors at the end of your dog's leash.
2. While he is not paying close attention to you, say his name followed by "come" in a clear, excited tone.
3. Make movements such as tapping your knees and stepping backwards.
4. As soon as your dog comes to you, praise him lavishly without causing overexcitement.
5. If he does not come, lightly tug on the leash to encourage him. Again, keep an upbeat, excited tone to your voice – show him that coming to you is a very positive thing.
6. Repeat 5 to 6 times, gradually moving outdoors. As he improves, practice it without the leash **only if you have a fenced-in yard.**

Tips:

1. *Never* use the "come" command with an angry tone in your voice. *Do not* call your dog to you for negative things such as punishment, baths, or pills. Go get him instead for these things.
2. Rewarding your dog with treats may be risky – treats should be used infrequently or not at all. If you call him in an emergency situation and he sees that you have no treats, he may not come to you. The reward should be something you can always provide, such as praise.
3. If your dog tries to run away from you, do not run after him – this only turns it into a game. Try turning the game around by calling his name and running away from him. He may then run after you in play. If so, say "good come" and reward him with praise. This can be especially helpful in emergency situations.

What You Need:

- Leash and Collar