



Pawsitive Experience
1289 NW Promontory Dr.
Bend, OR 97701
541-318-8459
trainingdogs123@bendbroadband.com
www.PawsitiveExperience.com

Fading Food Rewards From Your Training Program

Most trainers use food rewards to train dogs. With food rewards, learning happens faster, and it is more fun for both the dog and the owner. But you want to be able to reduce, or fade, the rewards for learned behaviors, so you don't have to carry food around with you forever. Here are some tips on how to do this. If not done properly, you will end up with a dog who only works for food.

Random Rewarding: If you have ever gone to a casino and played the slot machines, then you know about random rewarding. The casinos have programmed the machines to pay off just enough so that you want to still play the game in hopes of the big payout. We want to be slot machines to our dogs. When you have the behavior 90% of the time with food, it is time to go from treating your dog 100% of the time to 80% of the time. When you have the behavior 90% of the time when rewarding 80%, go down to rewarding only 50% of the time and so on, until you are not rewarding that particular behavior with food any longer. Keep in mind that this will happen over many months, not over a few weeks. The biggest mistake people make is to remove the food from the training program too quickly. The other thing to keep in mind is you may have the behavior 90% of the time in one environment but not another. If you have a good "stay" and can move 20 feet away in your backyard 90% of the time, it is time to fade the food reward. But, you may only get a good stay at a park with other dogs around only 20% of the time. In the park, you will have to use food 100% of the time, until you have the behavior 90% of the time in that environment. If you don't use food, still reward them but use praise as a substitute.

Obedience During the Day: If we don't ask for behaviors and reward during our everyday routine and just reward during a training session, dogs will learn they just need to work for you when you are training. Put some treats in a bait bag or ziplock, and hide them on you. During the day, give them a command and reward. Even better is to hide the food somewhere in the house and go get the reward after they have done the skill for you. You will have a dog that will follow you everywhere and think of you as the center of their universe, which is just what we want from our dogs. As your dog gets better, integrate this with the random rewarding above.

Life Rewards. This is also called "Nothing in Life is Free" or "No Free Lunch." Your dog must earn his privileges. Your dog must earn anything they find enjoyable. For example, no toys, outside privileges, no play time, no dinner, or walks until they perform

an obedience command for you. This sets you up as the leader, and also teaches them self control.

If you follow these simple steps, you will have a wonderful and attentive dog who loves working for you.

Meredith Gage

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