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## **Rewards, Reward Markers, and Training Schedules**

**What are Rewards?** Rewards are anything that really motivates your dog. In training class we often use food as the reward because that usually holds the high value for our dogs. I suggest using whatever food your dog likes, such as cheese, hotdogs, or other meats. Some owners worry that if they give their dogs people food, their dog will develop the habit of begging for people food. If you are worried about that, there are great high-value training treats these days at pet stores. Just make sure they are small or can be cut up small and are soft so they can be eaten easily. I have also seen dogs that work harder for toys, so in these cases, we use toys instead.

**What is a Reward Marker?** A reward marker is a verbal or sound cue that tells our dogs they did well, and that a reward will follow. The most often used verbal markers are single words like “yes” or “good.” Dogs learn to associate a verbal reward marker with a reward. Using a clicker another popular method of providing a reward marker. A clicker is a small device that you hold in your hand. When you press it, a clicker produces a sharp and distinctive clicking sound. One advantage of a clicker is it can be faster to press and click than to say your verbal marker. Also, some behavior scientists believe the clicking sound engages a part of the brain that makes both the dog and the handler feel good.

Whether you use a verbal cue or a clicker, it is important to mark the behavior with this reinforcement as soon as your dog shows the behavior you want. Then get your reward to your dog as soon as you can after that. For example, let’s say we are teaching our dog to sit. Within a second of when your dog’s rear hits the floor, mark the behavior with “yes,” “good” or “click.” Then within another second, reward your dog with a high-value treat. This will help your dog quickly connect the dots and make the proper association.

**Training Schedules:** To keep our dog motivated, keep training sessions short. Five to ten minutes, several times a day, is best. Take frequent breaks or just give your dog affection for a few minutes, and then do another quick five to ten minute training session. It is easy to put obedience into your daily routine so it is a fixed training time. Check out my training tip “Obedience During the Day” for advice on how to do this. Of course, formal training classes can’t be just five to ten minutes long. Good trainers will know how to make an hour plus training class fun enough to keep your dog’s interest for that long.

The most important thing is to keep the training session fun for both you and your dog. If your dog is not having fun or seems tired or frustrated, take a break.

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