



Does Your Dog Think You're a Vending Machine?

(Weaning off of Treats)

When it comes to training dogs, food rewards are quicker, easier, and more effective than the use of punishment. However, if you want to maximize the effectiveness of food rewards you have to be smart: Smarter than a vending machine at least! Many pet parents make the mistake of rewarding their dog every time their dog does what they ask indefinitely. When you do this, you teach your dog to think of you like a vending machine. You don't want to be a vending machine! If you endlessly reward your dog with a food treat every time they do what you ask, they will quickly lose their motivation. Soon the only way you'll be able to get your dog to listen to you is by getting their attention with a food treat and bribing them into doing what you want.

Food rewards are so powerful and effective that it would be unfair to our dogs not to use them. It would be callous of us to deprive our dogs of something that has such a profound effect on their associations and learning. With that being said, we don't want to be tied to our treat pouch forever. We certainly don't want our dog's behaviors and choices to be contingent on a food treat. In fact we want the opposite, a food treat should be contingent on their behavior. To ensure that your dog doesn't ask you to "show the money" every time before fulfilling your requests, you'll want to start weaning from treats ASAP!

Putting Weaning from Treats into Practice

- Begin treating intermittently. An easy way to do this is to employ the **1:3 ratio** technique. This turns your dog into a gambler and keeps them guessing. Offer 1 treat for every 3 behaviors your dog performs correctly. Now your dog is playing the lottery!
- Ask for longer sequences of behaviors for a single treat. Try increasing the number of responses necessary to earn fewer and fewer rewards. Hypothetically, this means that you

will be expecting more for less, and your dog will perform an unlimited number of commands for little payoff.

- Switch up the placement of the treat pouch on your body. Try attaching it to your back pocket, or hold it under your armpit. Use different types of pouches and pockets to always keep them guessing.
- Begin using treats only as a reward for *doing* the behavior, *not* as a lure to get them to do the behavior! (If you absolutely must lure them to get the behavior, you need not always treat them for it... Especially if you asked for a sit 10 times in a row!) Just because I have a treat doesn't mean you're going to get one, and just because you don't see a treat, doesn't mean I don't have one!
- Be aware of leaving your treating hand in your pouch. You should only reach into your pouch *after* you have given the cue and marked the behavior.
- **A reward is not always food:** Use *life rewards* and non-food rewards instead of treats. A life reward is anything your dog enjoys! The best creative rewards are usually specific to your dog. While there are universal favorites in the dog world, every dog has preferences that you can use in your training and daily life together. Of course, we never, ever, stop giving plenty of verbal praise!
- **Become the center of your dog's universe:** The relationship between you and your dog is the foundation of all training. When training and spending time with you becomes your dog's main motivation and reward, you have reached *The Holy Grail of Dog Training*. In other words, your dog will pay attention to you, listen to you, and do what you ask, not because they are frightened, being forced, or being bribed, but because they *like* you, and find you extremely reinforcing!

When do we Use a Higher Rate of Reinforcement?

- When you are teaching a brand new behavior, aka, the luring phase. Reward with food for a dozen (+/-) trials when you are teaching your dog to do something for the very first time, and then begin intermittent treating ASAP!
- For exceptional, above-average responses (Super Star work!). You can **jackpot** your dog (several treats in succession) for any response that is magnificent. You may also occasionally offer the jackpot when he responds promptly following a single request.

- When adding any of the 3 D's to a behavior (distance, duration, distraction). For instance, when you are working in a new environment, when adding distance to a “stay” behavior, or when asking your dog to “leave it” for a longer interval of time.
- Whenever working around “Big Daddy” distractions (doorbells, squirrels, cats, etc. Things your dog goes absolutely bonkers for).

Remember to temper your expectations when weaning off of treats. Your dog can eventually perform reliably without treats so long as you don't expect too much, too soon!