

# Reward-based training for dogs (1)

A study by the Department of Veterinary Science at Bristol University in 2004 came to the conclusion that 'reward-based methods are associated with higher levels of obedience and fewer problematic behaviours'. Positive, reward-based training, according to research, is the most successful and humane way to train your dog. So what is it?

If you punish your dog, for example by hitting or shocking, your dog eventually learns a behaviour because he/she does not want to be hurt. However by reward-based training, you reward the dog every time he/she does something right, so the dog learns a behaviour because nice things happen when he/she pleases you!

In England and Wales working dogs, such as assistance dogs, army dogs or police dogs are not trained through punishment. Dog trainers have discovered that it is easier, quicker and in the long run, more effective to use positive reinforcement methods.

A simple explanation of how positive reinforcement can be used effectively is in training your dog to come when you call his/her name. If you begin calling your dog's name, and show the dog a treat, the dog will come to you. Repeat this over and over again, at different times throughout the day, and within a few days the dog will learn that if he/she runs to his/her owner every time he/she hears that sound (his/her name) then he/she gets a nice treat! You will soon be able to not show the treat, or even only give the treat sometimes. Compare this to punishing a dog if he/she doesn't come when you call. If you're angry that he/she didn't come at first, and smack him/her, you have just taught him/her that he/she sometimes gets smacked when he/she goes to you, so he/she is even less likely to obey when you call!

Your dog will be much more likely to learn a behaviour if it is associated with something positive, like a treat. If you can make the 'treat' for obeying your command a better treat than scavenging in that bin/playing with that dog/growling at the postman or whatever it is you're trying to stop him/her doing, your dog is going to learn to be obedient quickly, and with much less fear and pain than with any other method. Positive reward-based training is fun for the dog and his/her owner!

## Remember!

- Train your dog from an early age to behave well using rewards. Never shout at or punish your dog. The dog is very unlikely to understand and can become more nervous or scared. If your dog's behaviour becomes an ongoing problem, seek expert advice.
- Training a dog using rewards will help him/her learn to behave appropriately and make him/her easier to control. Good training can enhance a dog's quality of life.

# Reward-based training for dogs (2)

- If you hit or beat your dog for doing wrong or not understanding a command, you may be causing pain and suffering, and therefore denying him/her one of the **five freedoms**.
- Avoid harsh, potentially painful training methods. Only use positive, reward-based training.
- Frightening experiences and punishment can lead to behaviour problems and suffering.
- Remember that treats for training should be taken into account with your dog's daily diet – you don't want to end up overfeeding your dog because you are training him/her. If you are training your dog using treats, ensure that the dog gets a little less in his/her food bowl than he/she does when he/she is not being trained.
- Always ensure that treats are appropriate for a dog's diet. Dogs should only be given treats that are designed specially for dogs. Human biscuits contain too much fat and sugar for them to process well, and they will put on weight very quickly. Some types of human food, such as chocolate and grapes, are actually toxic to dogs and should never be given to them.