

## Training Tip Tuesday: Using Food

Lately, there has been a lot of controversy over using food when you're training. I've even seen a few ads for trainers boasting how they don't use food so the dog doesn't become reliant on it. Here's the deal – food is a fantastic motivator! Using food to help your dog learn and understand should not be looked down on. If you use food correctly, your dog will not become reliant on it, and it will only help you build your relationship. The problem comes from many people using food incorrectly. We want to use food to lure, and reward. The moment it becomes a bribe; you're in trouble! There are certainly dogs that have learned they don't have to do anything if the treat isn't present – and that's not what we want at all! Remember; there is a huge difference between luring, rewarding and bribing. A lure helps the dog understand and move his body in the correct way; a reward is the paycheck for doing it right. A bribe is when the dog knows what you're asking for and is holding out until you offer him some better reason to do it!

Not all dogs care about food; but whatever your motivator is – you can follow these simple steps to make sure the dog truly understands your request, and is willing to listen regardless of whether you have a cookie or not!

**Step 1:** The very first time we introduce a behavior; we want to motivate the dog to perform the action. If we were to just wait him out; it might take a while – so we use a bit of food to give him inspiration! Whether it's a treat wedged between your fingers for touch, a cookie held just over his nose for sit, a treat in your hand brought to the ground for down; chances are good your dog's nose will follow the food, and his body will follow. The moment he does what you're looking for; you can mark it and reward. We do this until we know the dog is going to follow the cue – then we move to step 2...

**Step 2:** Naming the behavior. This is where we introduce our cue word. If we had started with this, and the dog got distracted, or did something else – they would only learn to ignore the word. So – we start with the lure, then once we know its going to happen, we can add in our cue word. Yes – we are still using food! We want to make a really positive association here, and a few more minutes with a treat in your hand isn't going to make the dog dependent on the treats! Once the behavior is happening in time with the cue – we move to step 3...

**Step 3:** The most important step! **FADE THE FOOD!** This is the step that everyone misses that causes the issues. Once you have a cue in place, and your dog is reliably performing the requested task; start taking the food away! You can do it gradually; first remove it from the hand you were luring with, and simply reward from the opposite hand. Then start asking the dog to perform two or three times, and reward only at the end. Finally, start alternating your rewards; sometimes its food; but sometimes its praise, or play, or the opportunity to go sniff something they want (see the post Environmental Rewards). We always want to reward our dogs for a job well done - but it doesn't always have to be food.

So go ahead – break out those treats, and have FUN with your dog! There is nothing wrong with being a “Cookie Pusher”, and if it means I'll have a better relationship with my dogs; then I'll embrace the title proudly! 😊

PS – almost ALL dogs under 4 months old will work for food; which is why im always saying ditch the bowl and make meal time training time. After 4 months; dogs start choosing different things that have value to them; I have one dog that will do anything for tuna, and another that will do anything do a frisbee. Whatever you are using to reward should be something that's meaningful to the dog. Just because you think steak is great; doesn't mean your dog does too! To get the most success; let your dog pick their rewards!

<https://youtu.be/NoM5MzAwzek>