



Training Frequently Asked Questions

Q: How often should I train my dog? How long should I train for?

A: Ideally, training your dog every day will go a long way in improving their manners, building a strong reinforcement history and their responsiveness to behavior cues. While training every day isn't always feasible, any time you can work with your dog is always beneficial. Training sessions are most productive when the session is about 10 to 15 minutes in length. This keeps your dog engaged and allows you to focus on one behavior at a time without your dog getting bored. But even working with your dog for 5 minutes can be productive in reaching your training goals!

Q: How long before I stop giving my dogs treats as a reward?

A: Treats are a great way to reinforce desired behaviors that we want from our dogs! The goal when using treats is not so much to stop giving treats altogether, but to eventually fade the frequency of treats being delivered. When teaching new behaviors, you'll want to reward your dog frequently. As your dog becomes more reliable in responding to the requested behavior in a variety of environments, amid varying levels of distractions, you can slowly start to decrease the frequency that treats are delivered. You can work up to rewarding your dog on what's called a "variable reinforcement schedule" – rewarding your dog at different intervals that keeps the dog guessing when their next reward will arrive, which keeps them motivated and working. Think of slot machines – you play a few rounds without winning, then you try once more and you're rewarded with a win! Now you're more likely to play again, continuing to play in hopes that you'll be rewarded with the ultimate jackpot. Variable reinforcement schedules work the same for our dogs – they'll be motivated to keep offering behaviors and performing in hopes they win their jack pot!

Rewards don't always have to be food! You can use playing with toys, praise, or access to a desired situation (getting attention from people, going to play with other dogs, going on a walk) to reward your dog as well!





Q: Aren't treats bribery?

A: Treats function for dogs much in the same way that paychecks work for us! We perform our jobs knowing that a reward (a paycheck) will be coming our way, if not eventually. For our dogs, treats function in the same way. When a dog learns that a positive or pleasurable outcome is associated with their behavior, they become much more likely to repeat it. Take working dogs for example – any time a bomb sniffing dog is asked to search, and positively alerts on a scent, they are immediately rewarded with their favorite toy. That toy is their paycheck and incentive to keep working. And because they know that searching, and alerting when they find the trained scent, brings their favorite thing, they reliably perform the behavior.

Q: My dog doesn't listen at the dog park/local park/off leash? Why is that?

A: One of the big differences between humans and dogs is the ability to generalize learned information and behaviors. For humans, generalizing is an easy feat; we often generalize without realizing we're doing it! Dogs, on the other hand, are context specific learners. It takes them more time and more experiences to generalize behaviors to a multitude of environments, and they need some help to do so. After your dog displays a solid understanding of a specific cue in one environment, you will want to practice that same cue in other environments they frequent. Take "coming when called" as an example: you want your dog to reliably understand that cue by first mastering it in the home, then in the backyard, before moving on to places like a local park or dog park. Practicing behaviors you want them to comply with frequently, and in a multitude of environments and situations, is the best way to help them generalize.

When training, we frequently utilize the 3 D's – *distance, duration, and distraction*. You can practice each cue they know while building up the distance you are from them, for how long they have to hold or perform that cue, and then around different levels of distractions. Using "down" as an example: You can have your dog work on down at home while you're 5 feet away from them. Then build up to 10 feet, 15 feet, 20 feet, and on from you while at home. Once they can do that, you can work on them holding down for 5 seconds. Then build up to 10 seconds, 15 seconds, 20 seconds, and so on. Once they've mastered that, then start working on down in the backyard, then your driveway, then the street corner, then in a park, then the dog park. After practicing like this, you can then start combining distance, duration, and distraction. This helps your dog generalize behaviors!





Q: How do I work with my dog in high distraction environments?

A: Building on the answer from above, once you've helped your dog generalize a behavior to where they reliably understand what you're asking of them in a variety of situations, you can start working in high or very high distraction environments. When working in high distraction environments, you want to use reinforcers that are very high value to your dog – those might be a favorite or new toy, or delicious, meaty treats like pieces of chicken breast, slices of turkey or cheese, ground beef made into little balls, or similar. Sometimes making a "trail mix" of different types of high value treats also helps, as your dog gets variety with their rewards. When working in high distraction locations, you will be competing with other things your dog is likely to find reinforcing – interesting smells, other dogs or people, small animals, and so on. You'll want your reinforcer to be of higher value than those things. Training in high distraction environments will be a situation of "quality over quantity" – short training sessions where you're able to keep your dog's focus (your dog successfully performing the cue asked of them a few times) and ending on a positive note will be most effective.

You'll want to set your dog up for success as well – sometimes, just being around high levels of distraction is enough of a challenge for your dog, and you'll want to utilize distance from those other competing reinforcers (dogs, people, critters, favorite locations) to help your dog remain focused. For example, if your local park has a dog park, you can start working on the behaviors you want to practice at a healthy distance from the dog park (far enough away that your dog is aware of the distractions, but not so close that your dog can't focus) and work until your dog is reliably performing the cue you've asked of them. You can then start moving closer to the dog park with each successful outing, until you're able to work right up near the fence and still have your dog focused and listening to you!

