

Training Your Dog to Success

(1) Dogs learn by associating cause and effect in a SHORT time frame: ten to fifteen seconds, and by having the SAME cause and effect happen repeatedly. Thus, training your dog successfully requires practice practice practice. Ideally any behavior you are training should be practiced five to six days a week. Do not expect success if the only training you do is once a week in class.

(2) You want FREQUENT practice, but NOT lengthy practice. Keep training sessions short and upbeat. This is ESPECIALLY true for a puppy or young dog. Five to ten minutes a few times a day is MUCH more effective, especially for a novice or young dog, than one lengthy session.

(3) Once your dog does something well, make a big deal out of it with praise and treats, and STOP. Do not succumb to the temptation to watch him do it beautifully over and over again. There is no surer way to sour a dog on training. Be aware that children particularly delight in “training” dogs this way and need to be encouraged NOT to.

(4) The corollary of (3): if you have been working on a particular behavior for a quite a few minutes and the dog starts doing it LESS WELL than he was a minute ago, ask him to do something simpler (like “look” or “sit”), praise him when he does it and STOP. What you are seeing is puppy brain frying. Come back to it the next day. ALWAYS END TRAINING BY ASKING THE DOG TO DO SOMETHING S/HE DOES WELL AND PRAISING – END ON A HAPPY NOTE!

(5) Each time you start a training session on something you are working on, always start at a level of difficulty a step or two LOWER than whatever you last left off on. In other words, if last session puppy was holding the sit for a whole minute, start with 45 seconds and then work up to and beyond a minute. Or, if puppy could hold the sit while you slowly lowered a toy to the floor, start by asking him to hold a sit while someone else walks by and work back up to, and beyond, putting the treat on the floor.

(6) Give your dog at least one day off a week from working on anything new. By “new,” I mean a behavior that he has not yet learned solidly. I am also NOT talking about enforcing general manners – dogs do not get a “day off” on which they are allowed to surf the countertop, for example. Studies show that dog learn new behaviors better if they are given periodic days off, rather than drilled every day. They need the “down time” to fully process what they are being asked to do.

(7) Plan for your dog to succeed. If you are having to correct constantly – for example when asking your dog to hold a “stay,” you are probably increasing the level of difficulty too quickly. For your dog to be motivated to succeed, he has to experience success (and reward!) frequently. Constant correction just puts

everyone in a bad mood. Back up and ask for less – reward the success, and you’ll have a much more trainable dog.

(8) Fade treats, but not praise! Develop a habit of praising your dog EVERY time he does something right – preferably with specific information: i.e., “Good sit!” When teaching a new behavior, treat every time. When the dog is performing reliably, fade to random treats, but if anything, increase the praise. Praise when the dog ceases a negative behavior (such as jumping up), but never treat for that or the dog will learn to do the negative behavior to get the treat. Do NOT EVER fade treats for your RECALL (eg: COME) command if at all possible.