Being Positive About Positive Reinforcement

Because animals learn from their experiences, everyday they learn something new, or what they already know is reinforced. One type of learning, called operant conditioning, occurs when individuals learn the relationship between behaviors and their consequences. Behavior that is followed by positive consequences (such as a treat) will increase in frequency and behavior followed by negative consequences (a squirt from a water bottle) will decrease in frequency.

While human behavior may be motivated by ethics or a moral code of right and wrong, an animal's behavior is motivated by what works for him. Your pet decides how to behave based, in part, on whether or not particular behaviors will get him what he wants or allows him to avoid things he doesn't want.

When you make the behaviors that you want your pet to show also work to get your pet what he wants, you've set up a win-win situation. Behaviors that are rewarding, and work for your pet will increase in frequency. That's the power of positive reinforcement. Positive reinforcement also strengthens the human/dog bond and is fun for both you and your pet.

What is Positive Reinforcement?
Positive reinforcement is anything your pet will work to receive. This might include food, treats, play, toys, catnip, petting, and attention. Pets differ as to what they consider valuable and rewarding so it is up to you to experiment to find out what your pet wants and will work for.

Avoid adopting the attitude of expecting your pet to do things "because you said so" without some reward. Would you go to work every day if your boss didn't pay you but simply because he expected you to do it for him? This kind of attitude is actually expecting your pet to behave, not because of the goodies it will bring him, but because he will avoid something unpleasant (you scolding him or being mad at him). While that sort of approach can be effective, it certainly isn't very enjoyable for you or your pet and it won't create the happy sort of trusting relationship that benefits both of you. You must reward animals to get them to do things reliably.

Verbal praise is not inherently rewarding for all pets. Sometimes it only becomes rewarding to a pet if it has been paired with some other strongly rewarding consequence like toys or treats. You'll learn more about this type of "secondary reinforcer" later in this article.

Some pets, usually dogs more often than cats, which are described as "eager to please," may do anything for a kind word. For these pets, social reinforcers such as praise and petting are quite valuable to them. But don't be surprised if your pet isn't in that category.

Ask your pet professional for more information about dog and cat behavior.
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> Remember, animals do what works for them.

You've learned from other pamphlets in this series the importance of preventing your pet from repeating unwanted behaviors. That's because behaviors themselves can be inherently rewarding. Digging in the back yard, scratching the drapes, jumping up on the table, or chewing up a remote control—all behaviors you don't want your pet to do—are their own reward. Remember, behaviors that are rewarded will increase in frequency.

Using Positive Reinforcement Effectively
To get the most out of positive reinforcement, you must know what to use and when to use it.

When to reward your pet. You must reward your pet when he's in the act of behaving appropriately. Let's say you see your cat scratching her post, and get a treat from the cabinet to reward her. She finishes scratching and runs to the kitchen, where you give her the tidbit. You haven't rewarded scratching her post, but instead rewarded her for running to the kitchen. Whatever behavior your pet is doing at the time you deliver the reward is the behavior that will be reinforced. A delay of even a few seconds may cause your pet not to associate the reward with the behavior.

How often to reward your pet. When you are trying to teach your pet a new behavior, it is best to give the reward every time your pet does the desired behavior. Once your pet has learned the behavior, it's actually better to reinforce the behavior randomly, some of the time. This means you don't always have to have a treat in your hand, but you should surprise your pet with a treat from time to time, and always praise or pet your pet for a job well done. Save the best rewards for the most difficult situations.

What to use for rewards. You already learned that whatever your pet will work to obtain can be used to reinforce behavior. The more you can control your pet's ability to obtain the specific reinforcer you are using, the more valuable and effective it will be.

This is another reason why praise and petting may not be all that reinforcing for many pets. Most of us who love our pets tend to talk to them and touch them frequently. Because attention from us is readily available, it becomes less valuable as reinforcement. This doesn't mean you should stop petting and talking to your pets, it just means you may need to find other items to use when you really want to reward good behavior.

Use tidbits for example, only as reinforcement, rather than giving them to your pet "for free." If you are going to use play to reinforce certain behaviors, you can hold back one special toy to use, rather than allowing your pet free access to it.

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Save the best rewards for the best behaviors. If your cat comes to you rather than chasing your other cat, play with her until she's worn out, rather than just a brief 30 second play period. If your dog comes when you call him in the dog park, give her a whole handful of treats, not just one.

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How to Use Positive Reinforcement to Teach Behaviors

The easiest technique is to simply catch your pet spontaneously doing what you want and reward her. When you catch your cats resting quietly together rather than fighting, reward them. When you catch your dog chewing on her bone rather than the leg of the chair, reward her. In general, pets receive far too little reinforcement for good behavior.

A second method is to use a treat or toy to lure your pet into the behavior you are looking for. When the desired behavior, such as sitting, lying down, or getting in a crate is achieved, the lure is used as the reward. You may have heard the terms "prompting and fading" or "lure reward" to describe this technique.

More complex behaviors can be taught using a procedure called "shaping by successive approximation," often referred to as just "shaping." When you shape a behavior you reward a version of the behavior you want that, with each succeeding step, more closely resembles or approximates, the behavior you want. For example, if you were teaching your dog or cat to use a pet door, you might first reward them for just sniffing it.

Withholding Reinforcement for Unwanted Behavior

The other side of positive reinforcement is withholding the reward when your pet doesn't do what you want. For this to be effective, you must be able to control the reinforcement. For example, if you refuse to play with your pet because he doesn't come when you call, but instead he can enjoy himself by stretching out in the grass, not playing with him won't encourage him to come.

In other situations, however, withholding rewards can be quite effective. For example, your dog jumps on people for attention, walk away and ignore the dog. The dog is only rewarded with attention from the visitor when the dog has all four feet on the floor.

What to Remember About Positive Reinforcement and Learning

Pets engage in behavior because it works for them to get what they want. Behavior that is rewarded is repeated. This article has barely touched on the basics of how animals learn. Ask your pet professional about other resources on animal learning.

Written by Drs. Suzanne Hetts and Daniel Q. Estep, Animal Behavior Associates, Inc. and Ms. Lori Holmberg, M.A. Drs. Hetts and Estep are Certified Applied Animal Behaviorists and international award-winning speakers and authors living in Denver, Colorado. For over 25 years they have been helping pet parents understand their pet's behavior and solve behavior problems.

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