



Positive Reinforcement

What is Positive Reinforcement?

Positive reinforcement is a way to ensure a desired behavior will be repeated by rewarding that behavior. It is a part of the four categories of operant training. Positive reinforcement is one of the most effective ways to change your pet's behavior.

Why Should I Use Positive Reinforcement?

Training your pet with positive reinforcement is the best way to build a positive relationship with your pet. Your dog or cat will learn to trust you. He will learn that being with you and learning are positive experiences. Punishment can have the opposite effect. It can damage your relationship with your pet and create distrust and fear.

What is considered a Reward?

Rewards are anything your pet finds pleasant and will work for. Rewards can be food, toys, pets or praise. Some rewards may not be rewarding enough in certain situations. For example, if you are trying to teach your dog how to sit when he is at the dog park praise will not be enough. You may need to motivate him with a higher value reward. For most dogs, high value rewards are human food, like chicken, hotdogs, cheese or steak. For cats' tuna, chicken or salmon work well.

How Does Positive Reinforcement Work?

Correct timing is important when you are teaching your pet a behavior. You will want to reward your dog when the behavior happens or you can mark the behavior with a click, or a "yes" at the moment the behavior happens. The mark will give you a few added seconds to deliver the reward. If you reward after or before the desired behavior occurs, you will be rewarding the wrong behavior. For example, if you are teaching a dog to sit and he sits then stands up and you mark the standing behavior. He is being reinforced for the standing behavior.

Acquisition is the phase of learning when the pet is acquiring the new skill. Rewards should be used every time the dog does the behavior correctly.

Automation is the phase of learning when the pet is automatically offering the behavior when you ask them to do it without the food lure. Rewards should be used every time at this phase as well.

Generalization is the phase of learning where the pet is learning to perform the behavior in many different locations, with different people and with different distractions.

Consistency is also important. Having everyone on the same page consistently rewarding the desired behaviors will increase the speed and accuracy of the desired behavior.



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Do I have to use food rewards forever?

No. Once your pet can perform the desired behavior consistently in many different places, you may gradually start to fade out the food reward if you want to. Some people prefer to continue to use food rewards for the life of the animal.

Intermittent reinforcement is one of the best ways to ensure the behavior you just taught your pet will not disappear. You will begin to reward your pet randomly for the desired behavior. Your pet should never know when the reward is coming. They will continue to work because there is a chance they might get something really great. It is akin to playing scratch off lottery tickets in people. You never know when you will win something so you keep playing.

A Note on Punishment

Many people choose to use punishment with their pets because it can seem to be quickly effective. We do not recommend the use of positive punishment because it can damage your relationship with your pet, it requires a great deal of skill to be effective, and can make behavior problems worse. Your pet can learn to associate you with the punishment. If you have tried punishment and it has not worked, try positive reinforcement.

For more information or additional support, please contact the behavior department at (856)424-2288 ext. 114 or behavior@awanj.org.

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