

# TRAINING BASICS



Dog training is not a power struggle. Teach your dog what you want them to do with positive reinforcement, rather than focussing on how to stop them from behaving like a dog. Motivation, proper execution and repetition are key.

## How dogs learn

There are two major ways in which dogs (and other animals) learn:

1. By association:  
Event A → Event B
2. Through the consequences of their actions:  
Behaviour → Consequence

Examples:

1. You walk into the vet clinic → your dog gets treats (your dog learns to love going to the vet).
2. Your dog barks at you → you yell at them 'quiet!' (your dog learns that barking gets your attention and barks more).

Both types of learning require repetition. However, negative associations can form very quickly when the animal experiences fear or pain. This is why training and handling your dog using force and coercion is never recommended.

Training your dog should be fun for both of you. Happy dogs are much better students.

## How to teach a dog

Training happens in three stages:

- Installation
- Proofing
- Maintenance

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Define your training goal (i.e. fetch a toy when visitors arrive), break it down into steps and teach each step using food rewards.

Just like any normally functioning organism, dogs do not engage in behaviour 'just because'.  
No motivation, no training.

## Motivation

Most dogs do not work for dry biscuits. Find out what your dog loves to eat and to what extent. For example, roast chicken may be high value for your dog, dried liver is medium value and biscuits rate as low value. Use the most valued items for more challenging training situations (e.g. training under distractions) or when you want to build a particularly strong behaviour (e.g. reliable coming when called).

Some behaviours can be taught using play or toy rewards with some dogs. But this is rarely practical.

Praise and petting are not valuable enough to be useful as motivators.

## Installing a behaviour

Start with a simple version or an approximation of the behaviour you want, e.g. something the dog is already able to do or can easily be lured or signalled into doing. Every time the dog does the

behaviour, quickly give a tasty treat (success). Otherwise, do nothing (fail). Do 5 or 10 repetitions at a time and count the fails vs. successes. Repeat until your dog has a success rate of 80% or more. Then go to the next, slightly more difficult, step and do the same until you reach your goal. If a step proves too difficult for your dog (too many fails) go back a step or insert a simpler step.

## Proofing

Once your dog performs the behaviour reliably at home, start introducing distractions. Practise the new behaviour outdoors, first in a low distraction environment, then with higher distractions such as at the park with other dogs, on walks and at a cafe. Also practise at home when visitors arrive. If your dog fails too often, make it easier and increase the food value. Eventually, you can use other reinforcers such as allowing your dog to sniff for keeping a loose leash or throwing a ball for sitting.

## Maintenance

Behaviour that is never reinforced will become weaker and die. Keep randomly reinforcing your dog for the behaviours you have taught them or anything you would like to see more of.