



POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT

Positive reinforcement is an important component of training used to teach your dog the skills he needs to become a Pilot Dog. The purpose of this lecture is to give information on positive reinforcement. This lesson includes the following:

- Definition of positive reinforcement
- Different types of positive reinforcement
- How food reward should be used with your Pilot Dog

Definition of Positive Reinforcement

All dogs at Pilot Dogs have been trained using some form of positive reinforcement; as a handler, it is important for you to have a basic understanding of this method of training to understand how your dog was taught, and how to respond to behaviors appropriately when working with your dog.

The term “positive reinforcement” encompasses any response from the handler to a dog’s behavior that will increase the likelihood that the good behavior will occur again. Some examples of this are:

- Giving a food reward for stopping at a curb
- Scratching the dog gently under the chin after he has responded to an obedience command
- Telling your Pilot Dog “good boy” in an excited tone for stopping for a car in a driveway

Positive reinforcement is often referred to as a “paycheck” for your Pilot Dog’s work. It communicates to your dog that he is performing a good behavior, and will strengthen the bond between you and your dog.

Different Types of Positive Reinforcement

There are three main ways to reinforce desired behaviors:

1. Food reward - Food reward is one of the most powerful ways to reinforce your Pilot Dog. Examples of a food reward usually include a piece of kibble from your dog's daily ration or another low-calorie treat.
2. Physical praise - This form of praise includes any physical contact with your dog that your dog finds reinforcing, such as a scratch on the back, a gentle pat on the chest, or a soothing stroke on the head. Each dog is unique in their preference for physical praise, and you will learn what your dog prefers during training.
3. Verbal praise - Verbal praise consists of using appropriate vocal tone to communicate verbally to your dog that he has performed a behavior correctly. Generally, verbal praise should be a higher pitched, excited tone and should be genuine.

Pairing verbal praise or physical praise with food reward may strengthen your dog's response to these forms of praise. Each dog is an individual and responds differently. Your instructor will help guide you in understanding how to appropriately praise your dog.

How Food Reward Should Be Used with Your Pilot Dog

Behaviors that your instructor may have you reinforce with food include, but are not limited to, curbs, passing distractions appropriately, obedience, and recall. Pilot Dogs recommends following a basic schedule for when to give a food reward.

- When you are first developing a working relationship with your dog, your instructor will have you apply "constant reinforcement." For example, initially you will give a food reward at each curb your dog stops at.
- Once the dog has shown proficiency (consistently stopping at curbs encountered), your instructor will guide you in decreasing the food reward to "random reinforcement." For example, on a route with eight curbs, you will choose four curbs randomly to reinforce with food.
 - It is crucial that you choose these curbs randomly so your dog does not anticipate the food reward at the same curb during every route. Something to keep in mind would be choosing which curb to reinforce with food based on how

well your dog performs the behavior, especially in the presence of distractions or complex environments.

- Ideally, once you bond as a team and are out in the field (by 4 to 6 months), your dog should be on a handful of food reinforcements of 10 to 15 pieces of kibble per day.
- When going home or to a new environment, it is generally recommended to return to a constant reinforcement schedule; remember that your home environment is familiar to you, but completely foreign to your dog. Once your dog shows proficiency with behaviors in a new location, you may start to diminish the amount of food reward to a random schedule.
- It is important to maintain a random reinforcement schedule for the working lifetime of your dog, as this will ensure your dog continues to work positively and confidently.
 - Generally, a working team that has faded reinforcement down to a random reinforcement schedule would mean giving your dog 10 to 15 kibbles throughout the day. This is random and holds a high degree of value to your dog.
- The way you give food to your dog is critical to maintaining an appropriate guidework position. You will use a method called “clean delivery.”
 - With this method, you bring the food swiftly and directly to the dog’s mouth to keep the dog’s head position straight and looking forward; if you fail to deliver the food directly to your dog’s mouth, this will cause him to curl in front of you, potentially misaligning your position for a straight street crossing.
 - When giving food you should only bend slightly at the waist and knees; this will ensure that you are not bending into the street as you are giving the reward.
 - Food reward should generally come from the right side of the handler. Many handlers choose to wear a food pouch; this is typically clipped onto a belt on the right hip, out of the dog’s line of sight so as to not distract the dog.
- It is crucial to follow the recommendations of your instructor with regards to food reward. Because this method of reward is so powerful, it must be used correctly to create good habits in your Pilot Dog.