

canine questions

By Sharon Harvey

Q I've been taking my dog to a trainer who uses food as a reward. As long as I have food, my dog is GREAT, but without it, I'm toast. Am I doomed to having crumbly, slimy pockets for the rest of my dog's life?

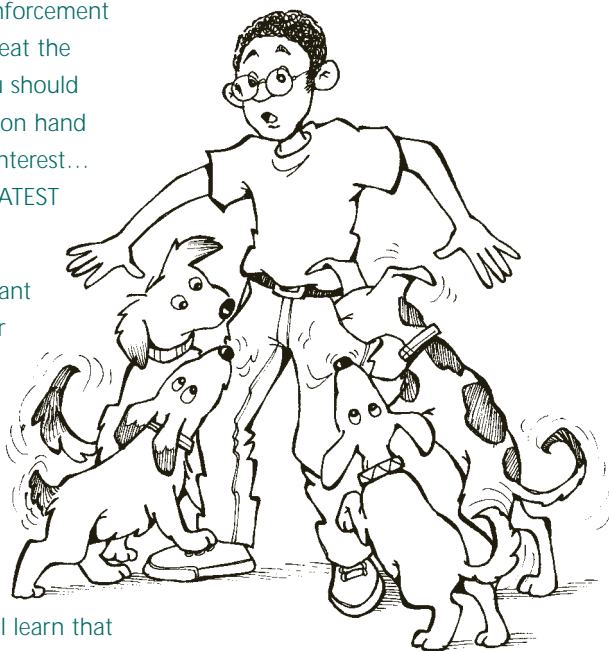
A No you're not doomed! Your "smelling like a walking hot dog" days can be over. All you need to do is gradually wean the food so she doesn't expect it everytime she's good.

When you train with food, you're giving your dog something she loves when she offers behavior you like. This positive reinforcement makes it more likely that she'll repeat the behavior. To be most effective, you should have three different types of food on hand that will elicit increasing levels of interest... good treats, great treats, and GREATEST treats.

The reward must be given the instant she offers the desired behavior. For this reason, it's important to teach her a conditioned reinforcer (CR). A CR can be a sound (a click) or a word ("YES!") and bridges the time gap between the desired behavior and presenting the food reward. By pairing the CR with the food reward a few times, she'll learn that the CR means her food reward is on the way.

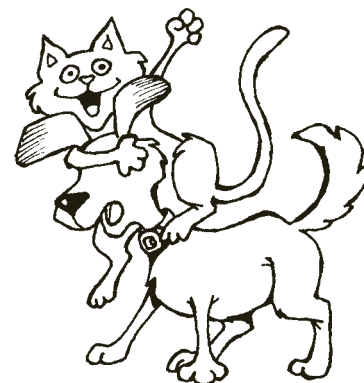
When you're teaching your dog a new behavior, start with GREAT treats and give her one every time she repeats the behavior. Once she's offering the behavior reliably, her reinforcement should become random and intermittent, and you should use less enticing treats. For example, go from reinforcing every repetition of the behavior to reinforcing her after two repetitions, then one, then three, then one again then four, and so on, until she never knows when the food reward is coming. This weaning process needs to be VERY random and VERY gradual. If you wean too quickly, she'll catch on that she isn't getting a reward and may not work with the

same enthusiasm. If your schedule of reinforcement is too predictable, she'll know when there is or isn't something in it for her. If you keep her guessing, she'll always be working for the treat that might be on its way.



One more thing ... if you're wearing a bait pouch, lose it! If it looks like a training session and smells like a training session, then it's a training session and she's onto you. Hide the treats and let the CR buy you time to give her the reward.

Now wash the hot dog grease out of your pockets and rejoice. All you have to do is weiner... or wean her... whichever you prefer...!!



If you're having a problem with your cat or dog, call the Rescue Village HelpLine at 440.338.4819, ext. 13 or send an e-mail to askthetrainer@geaugahumane.org. We'll help you solve your problem or refer you to someone who can. The most frequently asked questions will find their way into the Rescue Village Reporter's Ask the Trainer column or onto Q104's Ask the Trainer radio segment that can be heard on Sunday's Wilde & Fee Morning Show during the 8 o'clock hour.

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To shelter and find homes for sick, injured, abused, and abandoned domestic animals that have no other alternatives

To foster compassion for all living things through education

To reduce pet overpopulation through spay/neuter programs

To prevent cruelty by advocating and enforcing animal protection laws