

Dog: Training Philosophy



Reward-Based Training

At the SF SPCA, we use reward-based training methods. A reward can be anything that motivates a dog. For example:

- Food, treats
- Playtime, getting a toy
- Attention
- Belly rubs
- Going for a walk
- Being invited onto the couch
- Having a door opened
- Having a ball thrown

Like people, dogs perform better when they are reinforced for their achievements. Rewards maintain the motivation and build a positive human-animal bond. By contrast, only telling dogs when they do something wrong is discouraging to them, just as it would be for humans.

Think of people as dogs' teachers. If you took a class on computer programming and did badly on a test, should the teacher hit you or scold you? The idea is absurd. A good teacher would help you prepare better for the next test by improving your study methods, perhaps start you off with easier material this time, and encourage your efforts so you don't give up.

The next time your dog does something you don't like, ask yourself how you can help him get it right in the future.

How to Say "No"

Using reward-based methods doesn't mean you never say "no" to your dog. You just say it in a way he understands instead of using human language. Either:

Ignore the behavior. Don't reinforce or inadvertently reward unwanted behavior.

Avoid the situation. Manage your dog's behavior and set him up to succeed. Restrict your dog's access to a place, person, or object.

Redirect him to an alternative behavior and reward often. For example sitting instead of jumping up.

Punishment

Physical punishment, force, and intimidation have no place in dog training—or any other kind of learning experience. Punishment scares dogs and fear inhibits learning, i.e., the only thing the dog learns is to be afraid of the punisher. Worse yet, studies show punishment often results in serious behavior problems like anxiety disorders and aggression.

To learn more, read the American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior's position statement on punishment at avsabonline.org/resources/position-statements.

Training Resources

- Sign up for one of our dog training classes (see our online schedule).
- Consult a professional dog trainer. We have a list of trainers on our website who use reward-based methods.