

# Building a **REWARD SYSTEM** for Effective Dog Training

By Anne Stocum, photos by author



You have a new puppy and are excited to get started with the fun training games that will result in agility stardom in a few years. Or, you have an older dog and want to improve your training results. Have you thought about how you use rewards, how you want your dog to think about rewards, and what type of rewards to use and when? Do you have a mental model of your *reward system*?

This series of articles is about how to improve the way you use rewards so you can teach behaviors quickly and accurately, and strengthen your relationship along the way. There are many simple things that can be done right away to use rewards more effectively while other changes may take more time. When building a reward system, the work put in to develop good habits in yourself and the expectations you set for your dog will pay off for all the years of his life. It's worth the effort!

## WHAT IS A REWARD?

In its simplest terms—and in a training context—a reward is something your dog wants and something that will increase the likelihood of a behavior being repeated. A reward *reinforces* the behavior you seek. In reality any behavior your dog finds reinforcing is more likely to be repeated. This includes behaviors that are just part of

being a dog like sniffing, scenting, barking, seeking food and water, a nice comfy place to sleep, and the company of other dogs. In an effective reward system we use an understanding of what our dogs find reinforcing to build the behaviors that we want. Put simply:

Reward = Something your dog wants and can be used to reinforce behavior

Why do we reward? To build behavior in response to our cues:

Cue	→ Response (behavior)	→ Reward
"Sit"	→ Dog sits	→ Dog gets cookie



## THE POWER OF EFFECTIVE REWARDS

Think of the trainers you admire most. Her dog learns quickly and is fluent in a number of behaviors, performing each with a great attitude. His dog is responsive to his handling with great handler and obstacle focus and fantastic obstacle performance. Do you think this happened by accident? Or do you think these trainers

THE NERO BALL

## Not Just Another Dog Ball!



The number #1 ball choice of dog sport handlers and working dog handlers worldwide. It's perfect for fetching and tugging training games.

Made in the USA

**Clean Run**  
cleanrun.com

really know their dogs and use rewards effectively? I bet the latter! Very little in dog training happens by accident.

### A REWARD SYSTEM

What do I mean by reward system? It's a set of guidelines and basic rules—a mental model—around rewards that can vastly improve your dog training. Some of these principles are simple in concept but in practice require planning, rehearsal and training.

In an effective reward system:

1. The trainer knows what the dog finds reinforcing (what your dog wants).
2. The trainer controls access to the reward; that is, the reward can be delivered or can be withheld within a training session.
3. The dog understands that he “earns” his rewards.
4. The reward is discrete, in form and in time.
5. The reward is timely.
6. The reward placement is strategic and supports learning.
7. The reward is an “event” that involves the trainer.

Before we delve into each of these seven principles of an effective reward system, let's get even more basic. Reinforcement falls into two categories: primary and secondary.

Our dogs' primary reinforcement – taps into fundamental or “native” drives such as

- Food drive,
- Hunting or prey drive, and
- Social drive.

And then there are secondary or conditioned reinforcers. These are discrete events that are paired with primary reinforcement and take on value all their own:

- A clicker or marker word (“yes!”) followed by primary reinforcement.
- Toys kept interesting with chase and tug that tap into our dog's native prey drive.
- Attention and praise that tap into our dog's social drive.
- Body play (petting, chasing, wrestling, etc.) that taps into both social and prey drive.
- Any behaviors that are highly reinforced with primary or other secondary reinforcement: hand touch, collar grab, and, of course, agility obstacles.

### PRINCIPLE #1: WHAT DOES YOUR DOG WANT?

What reinforcement does your dog seek out without any intervention from you? Here is a starting list of things my dogs find reinforcing: access to food and water, hiking, sniffing, stalking, marking, chasing, chewing, barking, access to the outdoors, access to indoors, access to toys, access to *me*, praise and petting, social interactions with people and other dogs, a comfy place to sleep, and activities such as hiking,



swimming, retrieving, tugging, possessing a toy or a stick, fence running, and snapping at flies. I'm sure you can add others. The important point is that dogs like these things and their behaviors are pretty much always about seeking those reinforcements.

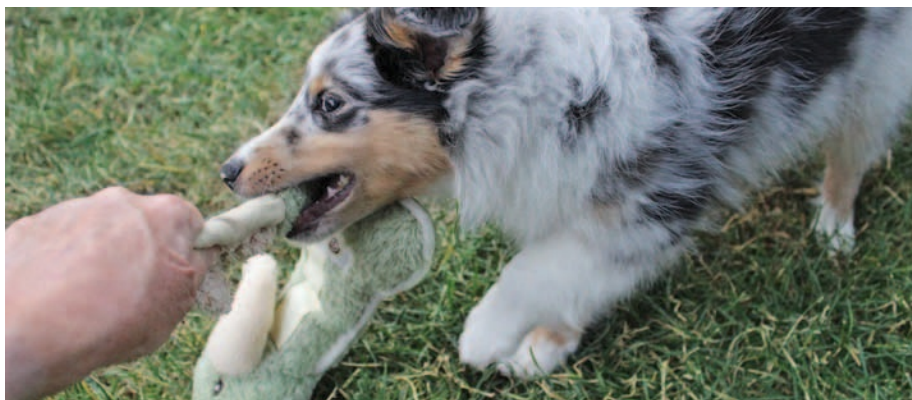
It's a good idea to make a list of the top 25 things your dog finds reinforcing—not just those used as rewards in training—and rank each of them from 1 to 10, with 10 being the highest value and representing a reinforcement your dog will want under nearly any environmental condition. A list of 25 sounds like a lot, but getting granular builds an understanding of how best to use reinforcement, and once you get started you will be surprised at how long the list gets.

Why rank the value? The relative value of a reward can vary depending on the environment. Your dog may love to tug at home but has difficulty focusing on the toy in agility class with all its distractions. Knowing this, a good choice would be to use high-value food in class and keep working on building value for toys in less distracting environments. Your dog may do flips for kibble at home, but in a highly distracting environment a higher value food reward like tuna fudge or a favorite tug toy may get better results.

Be a good observer of your dog's response to what is offered as a reward. Does your dog go nuts for any food, or do you need to pull out the steak to get a good response? Does your dog love to tug? Does he love to chase a ball? Does your dog love physical play? Does your dog love to chase you? Does your dog respond to praise or an excited voice? Only use what your dog wants when building behaviors. How do you know? One simple way is to watch your dog. After receiving the reward you offered, did the dog stay engaged and excited to keep working? Or did the dog immediately make the choice to leave you for other reinforcement or—even momentarily—start to look around for something better? Or lose a little enthusiasm for his work?

Remember, *reinforcement builds behavior*. Knowing *what* is reinforcing to your dog is critical to harness this truth for practical application. Trying to build behavior with something that your dog does *not* find reinforcing won't get you very far. The fundamental truth is *reinforcement builds behavior*, so be sure to use something your dog perceives as reinforcing.

## PRINCIPLE #2: CAN YOU CONTROL ACCESS TO THE REWARD?



Once you've made the list of things your dog finds reinforcing, narrow the list to those reinforcements that can be controlled; that is, a reward that can be given contingent on behavior criteria. The rewards will fall into two categories:

- The first category includes rewards that given directly to the dog: food in a form that is easy to deliver, toys that allow interaction with the trainer (e.g., tugging), praise, and social interaction (petting). These types of rewards are under your control, have a beginning and an end, and are repeatable. It's worth the effort to both build a repertoire of rewards that can be controlled and some rules around those rewards—more about that later in this article series.
- The second category is a reward in the form of *access to reinforcement* that the dog wants, like chasing squirrels in the backyard or playing with other dogs. That is why it's so important to understand what is reinforcing to your dog. Access to reinforcement is a powerful tool for building behavior.

Let's say you are working on impulse control with a stationary position like a sit or a down. There are multiple opportunities every day to reward the dog for staying until released to reinforcement. Sitting at a door until released to run and play outdoors, lying down until released to food bowl, sitting at crate door until released for a walk, sitting before being released to play with another dog. These are all great strategies for improving impulse control—the dog learns to earn access to reinforcement by making good choices and the value of that access gets transferred to the behavior you are building, making it stronger.



# Bungee Ball Tugs

Short, compact tugs  
that are great for training

3 styles to choose from

Made in the USA

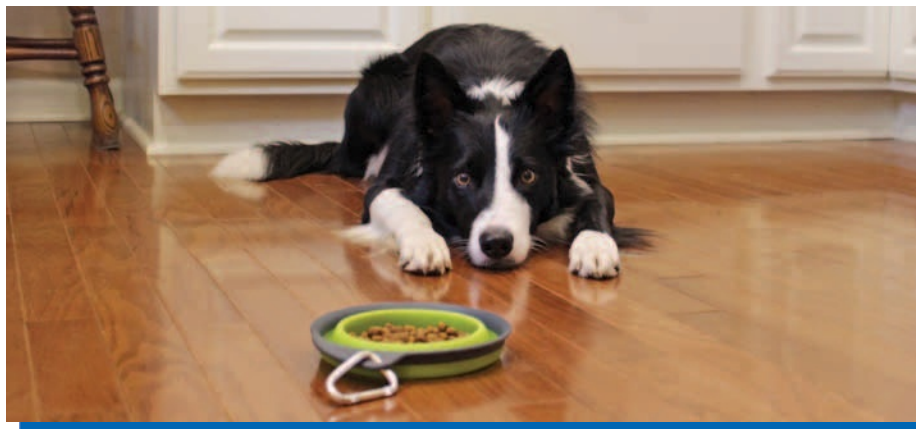


**Clean Run**  
cleanrun.com

What we are after as dog trainers is to build the behaviors we need for everyday life and dog sports. That means we have to use rewards that our dogs love *and* that we can control.

## PRINCIPLE #3: DOES YOUR DOG UNDERSTAND HE *EARN*S HIS REWARDS?

Just as important as understanding what your dog finds reinforcing is your dog's belief that rewards are earned. Restricting free access to rewards is an important part of an effective reward system. With my puppies, chew toys are for the puppy and tug toys are only out when being used interactively with me. Free time in the backyard is paired with lots of recall training. "It's your choice" games teach self-control around bowls of food. Access to the outdoors requires a sit at the door. Hand feeding portions of the puppy's meals is paired with shaping behaviors. These early experiences teach the puppy that life is about earning rewards by making good choices.



A lifestyle in which the dog earns his rewards teaches important lessons to avoid common pitfalls like the dog grabbing at toys or food in your hands, breaking start lines to get to the first jump, or stealing toys or foods that you are using as targets.

Based on these first three principles of an effective reward system, here is a summary of practical tips you can start using today:

- Structure your dog's everyday life around earning reinforcement. Ask your dog for a stationary behavior before giving access to reinforcement like the outdoors, his food bowl, or playing with other dogs.
- Know your dog. In training, only use rewards your dog wants, taking into account environmental conditions. Just because another dog will do flips for kibble or tug until he drops, doesn't mean your dog will.
- At the same time, work toward building value for a variety of rewards including food and toys.
- Explore how praise and attention are reinforcing for your dog. NEVER ignore your dog in a training setting.

In the next month's article, we'll continue to explore the principles of an effective reward system and I'll offer more practical tips and training ideas to make that reality for you. 🐾

---

*Anne Stocum lives in upstate New York and has been involved in agility for nearly 20 years. She enjoys teaching all levels of agility and helping teams achieve their best through consistent handling and good dog training that builds a solid foundation and is fun for both handler and dog. Anne has competed with her Shelties and Border Collies at the local, national, and international level. Anne blogs about agility and dog training and offers online classes at [www.annestocumdogtraining.com](http://www.annestocumdogtraining.com). Contact her at [jstocum@rochester.rr.com](mailto:jstocum@rochester.rr.com).*