

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

By Anne Stocum



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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. In Part 1, I reviewed the basics of how reinforcement builds behavior and offered a mental model of an effective reward system that follows these principles:

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.

In Part 1, a reward was defined as something your dog wants and can be used to reinforce the behavior you want. This set the stage for a discussion

of the first three principles of an effective reward system. This month I’ll explore the remaining principles and then finish with a list of ten practical tips for an effective reward system, many of which can be adopted immediately.

## PRINCIPLE #4: IS THE REWARD DISCRETE IN FORM AND TIME?

Remember, a reward is only effective in building behaviors if it can be given contingent on what the dog is doing in that moment. So the reward must be discrete; that is, each time the reward is given it is separate and distinct from the previous reward—and, of course, given contingent on the dog’s behavior.

Let me explain by using a few examples of reward choices that lead to ineffective training sessions.

**Example 1: Crumbly food rewards**—Suppose I’m teaching my very young puppy to sit and stay in position until released. I know my puppy loves food so I’ll reward with small pieces of food. As I split up the food rewards, I notice they are crumbling a bit but I think they’ll be fine after I finish breaking them. I ask the puppy to sit and take one step away. He’s brilliant and maintains his sit. I step back in and give the puppy a food reward, but it splits into several pieces as I deliver it. The puppy gets one piece and the other pieces fall to ground in front of the puppy. Guess what the puppy does? He gets up from his sit to get the other pieces of the reward. Oops. Now the puppy must be reset to try again, not because he’s done anything wrong, but because I’ve made a bad choice of reward. If I’m a smart trainer, I’ll pause the training session and choose another food reward that can be delivered quickly and exactly where I want the reward to go—into my puppy’s mouth!

**Example 2: Hard or chewy food rewards**—Let’s use the same example of teaching the young puppy to sit and stay until released. This time I’ve chosen freeze-dried liver as a reward. It’s hard to break up into uniform pieces so some are big and some are small, but I’m in a hurry and decide to go with it. When I reward the puppy with the first piece of freeze-dried liver, the puppy takes several seconds to chew the food and, while trying to chew and swallow the food, he stands up. Now the puppy must be reset again. Is it the puppy’s fault that the reward couldn’t be consumed quickly enough for him to remember what he was being rewarded for? I need to choose a food reward that can be consumed in one or two quick bites.

**Example 3: Thrown food rewards that can't be seen by the dog**—Suppose I'm teaching my young dog to drive a line of jumps in a class situation. He's very food motivated, but I'm still working on his toy drive and I'm not sure that he'll find a thrown toy rewarding in this situation. So I've decided to use food to reward my dog based on the environment—good choice! My food reward is soft and easily chewed and it doesn't crumble. The dog drives the line beautifully and I throw the food reward at exactly the right time as the dog commits to the last jump *but* he can't see it on the surface, so he turns back to me or searches for where the food reward has landed.

In all of these examples, a better choice of rewards would have enhanced the dog's learning and made the training session much more effective.

Food rewards should be non-crumblly, soft, and easily chewed.

When throwing food rewards, use large, contrasting pieces that the dog can see or place the food in a bait bag or food-dispensing toy like a Lotus Ball that can be easily thrown.

### PRINCIPLE #5: IS THE REWARD TIMELY?

This one should be obvious: when building a behavior, the correct response should be rewarded as close in time to the behavior as possible. To help with this we may use conditioned reinforcers like a marker word ("Yes") or a clicker to communicate with the dog and then follow immediately with food rewards or toy rewards.

Timely rewards build behaviors quickly. Rewards that are given late can confuse the dog. The dog may have performed the correct behavior, but if the reward isn't given the dog may think he's wrong. Late rewards can also train a completely different behavior than intended.

Some of the bad habits that interfere with the timeliness of rewards are: being unclear on the criteria for the behavior you wish to reward, breaking up food rewards in the middle of a training session, having food or toy rewards stored in a place that isn't easily accessible, or running out of food rewards in the middle of a session. These are all easily corrected by planning ahead. Have your food or toy

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rewards ready and accessible. Plan a short session—know what behavior you will be rewarding—and count out your treats if you're using food. When you are delivering the last treat, end the session and play with the dog.

Quickly delivering the reward is a mechanical skill and should be practiced. For example, if I'm teaching my young puppy to sit and stay until released, I want to work the behavior on both sides. When the dog is on my right, I have my treats in my left hand, freeing my right hand to quickly deliver the treat. When I move to the other side, I move the treats to my right hand, freeing my left hand to deliver the treat. So, simple yet so important. The same goes for toy rewards—before you bring your dog out to train, don't be afraid to practice throwing a toy so you're sure you can deliver it exactly where you need to.

## PRINCIPLE #6: DOES THE REWARD PLACEMENT SUPPORT LEARNING?

Another powerful principle of an effective reward system is placement of the reward. Do I want the reward to be delivered while the dog is stationary or while the dog is moving? Do I want the reward to come when I am close to my dog or when I am far away? Do I want the reward to be associated with driving to me or associated with completion of an obstacle? Ask yourself, "Is the placement of the reward supporting what I'm teaching my dog?"

Assuming your dog finds the rewards you are offering valuable, think about where you are placing the reward. If I'm teaching my dog to stay in a down position, I will deliver the food very low and possibly on the floor between his feet. By contrast, if I deliver the food above his head, he is going to lift up to get the food and be rewarded for lifting up. If I want to teach my dog to be independent in the weave poles, I will deliver the reward on the ground at the end of the poles. By contrast, if I always deliver the reward from my hand, I will encourage the dog to never take his eyes off me while in the poles because that is where he'll get

his reward. It seems so simple, doesn't it? With some thought and practice it can become second nature and will vastly improve your dog's understanding.

▶ A video is available at <https://tinyurl.com/ya6d9xf2>.

## PRINCIPLE #7: IS THE REWARD AN EVENT THAT INVOLVES YOU?

Let's say I've just completed a short agility sequence with my young dog and he was brilliant. I offer a toy and we begin to tug. The tugging lasts for 5, 10, or even 30 seconds. I've made the reward an "event" that involves me. Some of the reasons that tugging is such a great reinforcement for your dog is that it involves you and, just as importantly, it becomes an event for the dog that lasts more than just a moment.

But if my dog won't tug and I've chosen to use food as a reward in this same situation, I still want to make it an event. To make this happen I can:

- Keep my dog moving as I deliver the food reward.
- Offer an abundance of verbal praise.
- Offer more than one food reward.
- Even if you are using a food-dispensing toy like a Lotus Ball, *join your dog* as he gets the food from the toy and continue to praise him. This builds your relationship, keeps you part of the reward event, and expands the length of the reward.

## BUILDING BEHAVIORS FOR THE EFFECTIVE USE OF TOY REWARDS

Toys can be an extremely effective reward for your dog. In particular, playing tug of war is a great way to build your relationship because it is a team activity and taps into the dog's prey drive. But it's not so much fun if your puppy ignores the toy when you offer it as a reward; or won't bring the toy back to you once thrown; or won't release the toy to you after tugging. To avoid these pitfalls, think about training toy rewards as a series of behaviors. Build the behaviors slowly over time, making each behavior a fun game for the dog. Following is a set of games which I recommend mastering in the order they are presented. Once you have mastered all of the toy games you will have a high value reward—that involves you—for training a host of agility skills.

### Toy Game #1: Tugging Is Fun!

For puppies, choose tug toys that are sized to your dog and soft to the mouth. Using a long toy or a toy on a string works nicely with young puppies. You are tapping into your dog's prey drive so think of your puppy as a predator and the toy as prey (like a rabbit), and follow these three simple "rules of nature" to build value for tugging with toys:

1. The rabbit runs away from the predator so encourage interaction with the toy by moving it *away* from the puppy—don't shove it toward the puppy
2. The rabbit runs on the ground so mimic that by keeping the toy low to the ground.



3. The predator will stop chasing rabbits if he never catches and kills one. Let the puppy catch the toy.

While you will want to keep the toy moving, once the puppy gets his mouth on the toy let him tug. Only put as much pressure on the tug as your puppy will accept without letting go. Let him “win” occasionally by letting go while he is tugging, but then quickly get hold of the toy again.

Don’t introduce a release word to your tug game until you are consistently fighting to get the toy away from your puppy.

Don’t expect your puppy to grab onto a stationary/dead toy in your hand or on the ground until you have built tons of value for tugging with the toy so keep the toy moving!



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## Toy Game #2: Tugging Around Food

Helping your puppy understand that he can switch from toys to food and back again is an important part of building an effective reward system. Start with a low value food like kibble in your pocket. Get the puppy tugging vigorously, then take the toy away and ask for a behavior, like a sit. Reward with the food from your pocket and then release the puppy to chase the toy with lots of movement on the ground so you are tapping into the puppy’s prey drive.

## Toy Game # 3: Releasing the Toy

Once the puppy is tugging very enthusiastically and can switch between food and toys, introduce the release cue. Say the word (e.g., “Give”) and stop tugging. When the puppy releases the toy, mark the choice (“Yes!” or click) and reward with food.

Be sure to reward your release occasionally to keep that behavior reliable.

## Toy Game # 4: “Get It”

Once you have built a tugging fiend, you can start to offer the toy in front of you at the puppy’s eye level and use a cue to start the tugging game.

Using a toy that has a discrete surface to grab, ask the puppy to sit. While facing the puppy, hold the toy in both hands at his level, making sure the tug surface is clearly visible to the puppy. Say “get it” and take a step backward or turn and let the puppy chase you to get to the toy—the toy is moving away from the puppy. Let the puppy get the toy and play your usual tug of war.

## Toy Game #5: Pick Up the Toy and Bring It to Me

Once the puppy will consistently and enthusiastically take the toy from your hand for a game of tug, start the game by asking the puppy to sit. Face the puppy and place the toy on the ground between you and the puppy. Say “get it” and have a great tugging party when your puppy picks up the toy and brings it to you for tugging.

Gradually increase the distance between you and the puppy for this game. Encourage the puppy to drive toward you by running away after he picks up the toy, but don’t be too hard to catch and be sure to engage immediately in a tugging game!

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## Toy Game # 6: Bring a Thrown Toy Back to Me

Start to build short retrieves with the toy. Stand next to the puppy and ask for a sit or hold his collar. Toss the tug toy on the ground in front of the puppy, a short distance away. Both of you are facing the toy. Encourage him to look at the toy. Once he has focus on the toy, release the puppy to “get it” and step toward the toy. As soon as he picks it up start to play tug.

If your puppy is possessive about his toys, tie a string to the tug toy so that you can encourage him to come to you for a game of tug.

Once you are sure the puppy will pick up the toy after you send him a short distance, send to the toy, turn, and run away, letting the puppy chase you to play tug.

## TEN TIPS FOR AN EFFECTIVE REWARD SYSTEM

To summarize what we’ve discussed, here are ten practical tips that you can start to use today to build a more effective reward system:

1. 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.

2. 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.
3. At the same time, work toward building value for a variety of rewards including food and toys, especially tug toys.
4. Explore how praise and attention are reinforcing for your dog. *Never* ignore your dog in a training setting.
5. When using food rewards, use non-crumble and soft treats so that you can deliver one piece at a time and the dog can chew and swallow quickly.
6. If you are going to throw the food, use a big enough piece for the dog to see or use a food-dispensing toy like a Lotus Ball.
7. Be timely with rewards. Plan your rewards before your training session. Have them all ready and keep them accessible so that you can reward quickly in response to the correct behavior.
8. Be strategic in your placement of the reward. When rewarding behaviors that need to be independent, reward away from you. When rewarding behaviors that involve you, reward from your hand. If the behavior is stationary like a sit-stay, reward in position. When rewarding motion reward in the direction the dog is going with a thrown reward.
9. Be part of the reward event! After a job well done, tug with enthusiasm or otherwise keep your dog engaged while you deliver treats and use praise.
10. Take the time to train the effective use of toy rewards with the six games described in this article.

I hope these articles have helped you develop a new way of thinking about rewards that will improve your training and your relationship with your dog. Most of the tips above can be adopted immediately, while some require practice and training. But I believe by adopting these practices you will vastly improve your training and your dog’s performance, as well as increase the fun you have with your dog. It’s worth the effort! 🐾

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).

