



Guide Dogs for the Blind

Food Reward Basics Part 1

Please see the accompanying video: [Food Reward Basics Part 1](#)

Food Rewards

The puppy's regular kibble is used to reward the puppy. An estimated amount should be measured from the puppy's daily portion to be used for the training sessions. Any remaining food in the bait bag at end of day may be given to the pup at the next mealtime. Puppies being worked and socialized throughout the day may eat most of their allotted kibble in the form of food rewards!

Should the puppy not be motivated by kibble, the leader and CFR should be consulted regarding the use of high value food rewards. (See [Guidelines for Use of High Value Food Rewards](#))

Bait Bags

- The food rewards should be carried in a bait bag. Pockets may be used temporarily for impromptu rewarding, such as when taking the pup out to relieve, but the bait bag is an essential piece of equipment when handling and training a guide dog puppy.
- The bait bag should be large enough that adult hands can easily and smoothly get in and out of the bag.
- Plastic bags should not be used both because they impede smooth delivery, and the rustling of the bag becomes a secondary cue.

Positioning the Bag

- When working the puppy in 'heel' position the bag may be worn on the left hip with puppies up to 16 weeks of age. The bag may become a very visible lure with taller pups so it should be placed in the small of the back when working with puppies 16 weeks and older. When working on Paw Pad Games etc., having the bag in this position makes it easily accessible to both hands.
- Occasionally a puppy will tend to drop back from heel position to look at the hand reaching into the bag. If this becomes a habit, the handler may have to place the bag more toward their right hip and do some right-hand food delivery.

How to Present the Food

- The kibble should be held under the thumb and delivered directly to the puppy's mouth with the fingers pointing down. This method teaches the puppy to take the kibble gently with lips/tongue and prevents nipped fingers. See [Food Reward Games](#) for more information to help with puppies that take food roughly.
- The food should be brought to the puppy swiftly and directly. Quickly presenting the food right on the puppy's muzzle prevents the pup from moving out of position toward the food.

Markers

See [FAQ on Using a Marker](#)

We use the verbal marker "Nice!" said in a crisp, light tone to mark the precise moment the puppy is doing the behavior we want. The marker timing is important, it must be immediate and is likened to taking a snapshot of that instant of desired behavior.

Introducing the Marker

When first introducing the marker to a puppy, multiple pieces of food may be pre-loaded in the hand and fed to the pup one piece at a time after the pup hears the word “Nice!” The hand holding the food is held out of sight of the puppy in between rewards and only appears to reward the pup after it hears the marker word. It usually only takes a few repetitions for the puppy to understand that the marker means food reward is coming! This type of quick delivery is used when first teaching a baby puppy, during initial hand-tether exercises for example. Once the puppy understands the marker, a short delay while the handler reaches for the food reward in the bag, is not a problem.

Clean Handling

It is important that the hand reaching for the food does not move until after the mark so that the puppy focuses on hearing the marker word and is not looking for the signal of the hand moving. It takes practice to attain clean handling skills; handlers should play these games to become proficient before working with puppies: [Human-Only Training Games](#)

Remember the marker is a promise that food is coming; it highlights the desired behavior and once the puppy understands the marker, allows the handler 5-10 seconds to handle the leash and deliver the reward.

Right or Left Hand Delivery?

When the puppy is in heel position left hand food delivery is encouraged to help maintain a nice straight position. However, there may be times when right hand delivery works best, for example, when the handler needs precise control over the leash. This may be the case with a young puppy just learning loose leash walking, or with a distracted puppy.

When delivering food with the right hand it is important that the reward is brought quickly across the handler’s body and delivered in such a way as to keep the puppy facing straight forward. If the puppy anticipates being fed from the right hand in front of the handler, it will cause the pup to wrap, which could lead to problems later in formal guide training.

Handling the Leash with Left Hand Delivery

There are two methods for managing the leash during left hand food delivery and both are equally acceptable:

- The “front cross” is the term we use when the right hand reaches across the handler’s body and anchors the leash at the handler’s left hip. Grasping the leash this way allows for better control than just holding it near the center of the handler’s body.
- The “rear cross” is when the leash is passed behind the handler from the left hand to the right hand. This technique works particularly well for puppies that tend to want to drift ahead a little.