



Guide Dogs for the Blind

Food Rewards for Countering Distractions

Food rewards can be a valuable tool in helping puppies to focus in a variety of distracting situations. The success of any food-based reward relies upon the individual dog's desire to have the food; the value of the food reward has to compete against the reward the dog receives from the desired distraction. It is important that a dog's food motivation be evaluated prior to using a food reward program to insure success. It is essential that the proper foundation has been built, the handler is practiced in the techniques, and the desired response to the food reward is consistent, prior to using the food reward around the distraction.

In addition, all food reward techniques used must support the end goal behaviors desired in the pup's future as a working guide. Sloppy techniques will compromise the puppy's potential to work and focus on his job around food.

Raisers of puppies undergoing food reward training may have to work harder on exercises to ensure that the puppy does not assume that he can take food from just any human hand, and to prevent scavenging off the floor. If done correctly, the puppy trained with food will be well mannered in the presence of food and will understand that he may only accept food from the handler's hand in specific circumstances. If the raiser is concerned with the puppy's interest in food, or sees an increase in food-distracted behaviors, the leader and CFR should be consulted.

Video reference: https://youtu.be/H96XT_VOKqg

Preparation

Preferred Food:

- A portion of the puppy's regular kibble is preferably used as the food reward. An estimated amount should be measured from his daily portion to be used for the training sessions. Any remaining food in the bait bag at end of day may be added back into his daily ration. This will ensure precise knowledge of how much food the puppy is receiving each day and prevent any undesired weight gain due to food reward training.
- The puppy should receive only one kibble at a time as a reward, although, very occasionally, the puppy may receive several pieces of kibble at once as a 'jackpot'.
- In individual cases where kibble is not sufficiently motivating, CFRs should be consulted for suggestions for an alternative, high value food reward.

Food Reward Reminders:

- It is not permissible for the pup to take food off the ground or anywhere from the environment, even when dropped by the handler.
- It is not permissible for the puppy to take food from anyone other than the current handler (person directly handling the dog and holding the leash) even when food is offered by someone who previously gave the puppy food rewards.
- Food taken from the hand must be taken gently. If the puppy grabs the food it may be presented in a cupped palm rather than between finger and thumb. Pushing the food back into the puppy's mouth will also prevent him grabbing at it. If the puppy insists on snatching at the food he will benefit from further work on how to take food appropriately; CFRs should be consulted on methods to teach puppies to accept food in a reasonable manner.
- The handler must bring the food reward to the dog's mouth - the dog is not conditioned to reach towards the food.

Food Storage:

- The bait bag should be prepared out of the puppy's sight and prior to the training session.
- The bait bag should be placed in a position on the handler that is least visible to the dog as possible: on the handler's right hip.
- Rewards should not be stored in plastic baggies or pockets that rustle due to those noises creating secondary cues to the dog of impending food reward.
- If a pocket must be used it should be on the right side and easy to get in and out of.
- If the handler drops food she must move away from the dropped kibble and reward with a kibble from her bait bag. The dropped kibble should be picked up and placed back in the bait bag – never given to the puppy directly from the ground.

The Event Marker

The marker that signifies to the puppy the precise moment when he is doing the desired behavior is the word "Nice!" said quickly in a crisp, light tone. It is important that the puppy is not lured with food. He should be marked, and then the handler should reach for a kibble and give it to the puppy. The handler's right hand should remain stationary at her side for one second before reaching for the food. This is so that the puppy identifies the verbal marker with the food and doesn't focus on the movement of the handler's hand toward the food. In the initial introductory stage below, the handler may have a piece of kibble in her hand before marking. Immediately after the three introductory steps below, care must be taken to leave the food in the bag/pocket until after the puppy is marked. Handlers may take three to five seconds to deliver the food after the mark. This is why bags and pockets should have easy access.

Initial Introduction

The puppy should be introduced to food reward techniques in a familiar area where there are minimal distractions, such as the living room at home.

The puppy should be on leash in "heel" position. It is important to maintain correct position and avoid allowing the puppy to curl in front of the handler in an attempt to be closer to the reward. This is easily managed through precise methods of delivering food reward and prevention of unwanted positions. At first, placing the pup with his left side alongside a wall may help to keep him straight in heel position. It may be easier to have the puppy in a sit position at first but doing the exercises with him in a stand position closer approximates the ultimate goal – moving in heel position while being given food rewards.

Step 1

Teaching the puppy how to accept food from handler.

- With the leash in the left hand, the handler should take one piece of kibble in the right hand and give the kibble to the puppy (some puppies will initially show reluctance to take food). Food is delivered directly to the pup's mouth, preventing any need for the puppy to move his mouth towards the food. Care must be taken to present the food at muzzle level and never forward of the handler's left leg. Repeat a few times.
- Next, the puppy learns to wait for the handler to bring visible food reward to him: While the puppy is prevented from moving towards the food by collar pressure, the food is presented out in front of him a few feet (far enough away so that the handler can easily stop the pup from moving forward). Light collar pressure is applied (with the handler's left hand on leash behind the puppy's neck) while the handler's right hand positions the food a few feet in front of the puppy's mouth.
- The moment the puppy displays patience, he is marked and the food is brought directly to his mouth. Repeat until the puppy patiently waits for a few seconds without the need of collar pressure. He will be less likely to pull toward the food when he realizes that the only way to get the food to come to him is to relax and take pressure off the collar.

Step 2

Teaching the puppy that he is not allowed to accept food from anyone except his handler.

- With an assistant present, standing next to the puppy, the handler gives the puppy a couple of food rewards in the manner above. The assistant then offers the same kibble food to the puppy, off the puppy's left side. The handler prevents the puppy from taking the food by collar pressure and quickly presents the food reward to the puppy at the moment he ceases trying to get the food from the assistant. Initially some luring from the handler may be used to show the puppy that the handler will provide a reward, but luring should be diminished quickly.

- This sequence is repeated until the puppy understands the concept of not taking food from the assistant.

Step 3

- Teaching the puppy that he cannot eat dropped food.
- The handler drops food so the puppy sees it drop and prevents the puppy from getting the food.
- The instant the puppy stops pulling to get to the dropped food, the handler should verbally mark and quickly present the food from his right hand to the puppy.
- This sequence is repeated until the puppy understands the concept of not taking the food from the ground.

Adding Distractions

- When working around distractions timing is of utmost importance. The handler should reward the puppy for appropriate behavior before he is fully engaged in the distraction. It is permissible to use the puppy's name to focus his attention on the handler but the pup should respond immediately and completely to his name by looking at the handler's face. If he does not immediately respond then the timing of the prompt (saying his name) was too late or the distraction was too close or too engaging.
- The handler should try to make the puppy successful. If the environment is too distracting to get a reliable response, the distance from the distraction needs to be increased until the puppy is more relaxed.
- The puppy needs to be provided with ample opportunities for reward (the handler should not be stingy with the food!).
- More frequent rewards for successful behaviors from a distance are more powerful than getting closer to the distraction with less consistent results.
- If the puppy is too focused on the distraction, even to the extent of not responding to his name (the prompt) the first time, he needs to be moved further away from the distraction. The handler should not be tempted to say the pup's name repeatedly to get his attention.

Step 1

- With the puppy sitting or standing at "heel" position a distraction (another dog/ball/cat, whatever the puppy finds distracting) is presented at such a distance that the puppy hardly notices it. The moment the puppy looks away from the distraction or otherwise shows disinterest he is marked and given a food reward in the manner described above. Looking anywhere but at the distraction, relaxed ears and muscles, checking in with the handler, are all opportunities to reward.
- The handler may also give a prompt by saying the puppy's name once. The second the puppy glances up at the handler's face he is marked and given a reward. The puppy should be rewarded for making eye contact, not for looking at the handler's hands or for trying to see the bait bag. It is not necessary, nor desirable, for the puppy to stare continuously at the handler's face.
- If the puppy is relaxed and not engaging in the distraction he can be moved closer to it or the distraction set up may move slightly closer to him. We don't want to cause the puppy to be more distracted by the object than his desire for the food so progress closer must be very slow and positive.
- If the puppy becomes too distracted by the object the distance should be increased.
- In a set up situation, the distraction can be made more or less appealing depending on the puppy's responses. For example; a dog distraction may be kept still at first then gradually asked to move around and be more tempting. Only one criterion should be increased at a time, so if the dog distraction is moved closer it should go still again before progressing to being closer and moving around.

Step 2

- The same sequence of distraction at a distance, not too stimulating at first, is repeated but with the puppy walking at the handler's left side. Extra care must be taken with the technique of food delivery when moving; it is easy for the handler to get sloppy and increase the chances of the puppy wrapping around to get to the food. The reward should be quickly brought around to the handler's left leg and delivered to the puppy there. Feeding forward of the left leg will encourage forging and wrapping.
- The goal is to reward the puppy frequently for walking on a loose leash with, at most, just an occasional glance at the distraction. The verbal marker and food reward should be given for not looking at the distraction, relaxed ears and checking in with the handler. If reward opportunities are

not frequent than the puppy is being walked to close to the distraction or is not ready for that level of distraction.

- The puppy should never be lured with the food, that is, the food held in the hand to keep the puppy's focus on the handler. The food is left in the pocket or bait bag until the handler says "Nice!" then quickly pops the kibble into the puppy's mouth.

Progressing to 'Real World' Distractions

Once the puppy is responding positively and reliably in 'set up' distraction situations the handler can start taking the puppy out into situations where they may encounter the types of distractions that have been an issue in the past. The handler should try to control the situation when feasible to give the puppy many chances for success. Staying at a distance from the distraction, when possible, and moving closer once the puppy understands that the food reward game is being played, will increase his desire to stay on task. If the situation is too much for the puppy he should be removed from it as quickly and quietly as possible so that he does not get the opportunity to practice negative behaviors.

The handler should always be prepared with kibble in a jacket pocket or in a bait bag when taking the puppy into public places. Puppies on a food protocol for distraction may need occasional reinforcement until they go into formal training. It is better to be prepared, and prevent the puppy from becoming engaged with a distraction, than to assume that the puppy does not need the food protocol any longer. Being caught by surprise, with no kibble on hand, is akin to being caught without clean up equipment!

If you have any questions about this protocol, or your puppy's individual responses, please contact your leader or CFR.