Puppy Raising R+ Training Philosophy
Maximizing positive reinforcement and judicious use of punishment (corrections) in an R+ program

A Brief History
In 2013, Guide Dogs for the Blind initiated a five-year project to systematically change all departments that handled dogs in any capacity to maximize positive reinforcement. Following the successful transition of the Training department to positive reinforcement (R+) methods, this project saw procedural changes across the Breeding Department, Veterinary Department, Canine Welfare Training and Neonatal Departments, and of course the Puppy Raising program.

As we provided our puppy raising volunteers with the skills required for effective R+ training and encouraged a mental shift from reactive to proactive handling, raisers took on the challenge with enthusiasm. The transition to teaching new behaviors with sophisticated luring, shaping, and selective reinforcement has seen vast improvements in not only dog behavior but also raiser engagement and public perception. Our program is positive, but not permissive. The aim of this document is to clarify when, why, and what techniques may be appropriate in an R+ training program, and the steps to help determine what tool(s) are available.

GDB’s R+ Training Philosophy
GDB follows a training philosophy that maximizes positive reinforcement (R+) and setting dogs up for success to minimize the use of punishment (corrections). In the canine behavior world, this type of training philosophy has been coined the LIMA (Least Intrusive Minimally Aversive) philosophy for training and behavior modification. This approach encourages a maximally humane method of prioritizing positive reinforcement and a focus on what you want the animal TO DO and enabling a “right answer”.

Health and Wellness
GDB’s training approach begins with ensuring a dog’s health and wellness. As many raisers have experienced, puppies often act up when they are feeling unwell (e.g. whining in the crate due to a GI upset). It is important to first rule out medical concerns to ensure a training/behavior modification plan is not used to cover up symptoms of underlying pain or illness.
**Management**
This entails setting puppies up for success, and can take many different forms. People commonly think of management in the house: crates, tie downs, and baby gates to prevent the puppy from accessing inappropriate items before s/he has learned how to behave around them. The following are also examples of appropriate management choices:
- Working on puppy handling with a calm, sleepy pup rather than one that is eager for play time.
- Using a Gentle Leader head collar on the puppy if the raiser anticipates a high distraction environment.
- Choosing not to take the puppy on an inappropriately challenging outing.

**Food Rewards for Desirable Behavior (R+)**
Rewarding with food is what generally comes to mind when we think of R+ training. When we are training a new behavior or trying to change an existing behavior, food is generally the most practical reward for the dogs in our program. The Training department also uses food rewards when teaching formal guidework skills. It is important that puppies learn that their behavior can earn food rewards. 
Note: Throughout puppy raising, praise/petting should also be used generously to reward good choices, so that puppies enter formal training enjoying praise and petting in addition to food rewards.

These tools are all that are necessary when teaching puppies new commands and skills, in the absence of unwanted behaviors. When training new behaviors, managing the training environment is important to develop confident puppies that are eager to try to earn food rewards for offering correct choices.

**What About the Real World?**
Of course, we acknowledge that training sessions don’t always go as planned. If the puppy isn’t learning skills as quickly as expected, the raiser should go back to the first three tools (ensuring the pup is physically comfortable; management to prevent undesirable behavior and rewards for desirable behavior).

**Considerations When the Puppy Isn’t Progressing**
- A higher rate of reinforcement or better reward timing may help the puppy understand what is being requested.
- Puppies are individuals and learn at different rates: a puppy may pick up one skill quickly but may struggle with other behaviors.
- As long as puppies aren’t practicing inappropriate behaviors, it often helps to lower expectations and make the exercise easier for the puppy.
A puppy that fails to perform a requested cue is either insufficiently motivated or does not know the cue as well as the raiser thinks! Corrections are not an effective way to teach new skills and should not be used while teaching a new behavior.

**Dealing With Inappropriate Behaviors**

Sometimes, even with the best foresight, puppies display inappropriate behaviors. “Positive” training is not “permissive” training. Inappropriate behaviors still crop up, even with very creative management. This is especially common when it comes to house behavior and behavior in high distraction situations. In fact, as the puppy matures, the occasional slip-up is not unusual as the pup is given more freedom and responsibility to make correct choices on its own.

**Reward Alternative Behavior**

The first tool when dealing with inappropriate behaviors is to proactively reward an alternative behavior; teach the puppy an appropriate behavior that is incompatible with the behavior they naturally want to exhibit. For example, if a puppy jumps up on visitors, the raiser can teach the pup to lie calmly on a dog bed instead. Lying on a bed away from the visitors is physically incompatible with jumping on visitors. These alternative skills should first be taught in a non-distracting environment before being introduced to more and more difficult situations (e.g. introducing Go to Bed when there are no distractions, then doing set ups with a training partner practicing entrances and exits, eventually working up to strangers knocking on the door.)

**Removing Reinforcement (P-)**

What if the puppy does exhibit an unwanted behavior? We start by removing reinforcement (i.e. removing what the puppy wanted). For example, puppies often vocalize to seek attention from the raiser. They have learned that these behaviors are rewarded by attention. Actively removing attention (i.e. turning away or even walking out of the room, if it is safe to do so) when the puppy vocalizes, teaches the puppy that this behavior results in the removal of the thing the puppy wanted (attention), and decreases the likelihood the puppy will choose to vocalize the next time it wants attention. And if the raiser has done a good job of teaching an alternative behavior (e.g. sitting quietly), it is likely the puppy will choose to offer that behavior instead.

**Correction (P+)**

Lastly, sometimes circumstances require immediately stopping an undesirable behavior, whether because of the puppy or raiser’s safety, or the undesirable behavior itself is rewarding (e.g. chewing on inappropriate items, or counter-surfing). Other times, puppies become frustrated when something that was previously rewarded now results in the removal of rewards, causing unwanted behavior to occur with more and more intensity and vigor. These situations require correction to stop the behavior to prevent further escalation and to help the puppy choose a more appropriate response. The type and intensity of correction may vary based on the situation and the puppy’s prior training history. Raisers should receive instruction from their leader/CFR on how to determine and implement the lowest level of effective correction required in a given situation. The goal of a correction is to stop the unwanted behavior so that the raiser can quickly go back to rewarding the
puppy for making an appropriate choice instead. It is critical to always maintain an emotionally neutral demeanor if a correction is required.

If raisers find it necessary to apply corrections repeatedly to stop a behavior, this indicates a need to change the environment and/or review handling techniques. If a raiser is giving frequent corrections, they should seek help from a leader/CFR.

**In no instance is it ever acceptable to correct a puppy by verbally intimidating, hitting, or kicking the puppy.**

(For house behavior issues that occur when the puppy is home alone, leaders can reach out to their CFR for special protocols.)

**Summary**

GDB’s training philosophy maximizes positive reinforcement and encourages a proactive training approach. R+ training emphasizes setting puppies up for success by teaching appropriate behaviors and managing challenging situations to give the puppy the best chance to make correct choices (and be rewarded for doing so!). There are also a number of tools in our toolbox for situations where puppies do perform undesirable behaviors in order to teach them how to behave instead. Raisers are encouraged to speak with their leader (who may consult with the CFR) if the puppy is not responding appropriately or progressing as expected.
A visual representation of the GDB Puppy Raising Roadmap of Reinforcement, inspired by Dr. Susan G. Friedman’s Hierarchy of Behavior Change Road Map (http://www.behaviorworks.org/files/downloadable_art/Hierarchy%20Road%20Map%20curve.png)