



# Guide Dogs for the Blind

## Puppy Raising Department Ruff Notes – January 2020

### Smart Use of Reinforcement for Calm/Settled Behavior

Food rewards are the primary tool used for introducing new behaviors across the puppy raising program. When used with precision and finesse, food rewards can very quickly teach puppies desirable behaviors, and the amount of food needed to sustain desirable behavior can decrease quickly. However, poor timing or a lack of clarity can result in puppies running the show!

“When I reward him, he gets excited and is worse than if I just ignore him!” One common scenario that raisers find themselves in is struggling to reward a puppy for calmly settling. This is an important skill for our puppies to learn. As they begin careers as guide dogs, they will need to settle on public transportation, in an office for an 8-hour work day, at restaurants, shopping centers, meetings and doctor’s appointments. A well trained guide should be invisible in public settings, “I didn’t even know there was a dog here!” In public, a settled puppy should be calm, relaxed, and not staring at the handler or anyone else in the room.

This document provides some helpful tips to manage these tricky situations and identify the most appropriate strategies to reinforce desirable behavior.

Please be clear that we are NOT saying to stop rewarding puppies with food; rather, there are a couple common situations to watch out for:

- 1) Accidentally rewarding a puppy right after it shifts/moves or otherwise gets your attention.**  
Puppies can very quickly learn that when the handler is focused on something else, fidgeting is an effective way to get the handler’s attention and earn a reward. On a similar note, it is very tempting to reward a puppy for choosing to lie back down after it has gotten up from settling by the handler’s feet, but this can quickly become a game of stand up – lie down – stand up – lie down! These “behavior chains” can be created very quickly so remember that puppies should not be rewarded shortly after making a mistake and needing to be cued back into position by the handler. The handler should wait for at least ten seconds of duration before rewarding after the pup is repositioned. The key is to estimate when to reward before the pup moves again!
- 2) Expectations (or highly desired, exciting reinforcers) can lead to frustration.**  
Puppies that are accustomed to a high rate of reinforcement (or even just a very predictable one) can often become frustrated when they expect a reward and it doesn’t come. Puppies can also show frustration if they really want a reward but don’t understand what behavior will earn them access. We often see this in the form of demand barking, mouthing or pawing at the handler, or other inappropriate frustrative behaviors. Such frustrative behaviors can be accidentally reinforced with the handler’s attention (even if it is to give a correction – think of the class clown).
- 3) Sometimes marking and feeding is NOT the answer! If the marker and/or food rewards cause the puppy to become overly excited, calm/soothing praise and petting are a smart alternative.**

Remember that the marker word “Nice” should not be used when rewarding calm behavior to prevent puppies from becoming overly excited. Sometimes simply using food can lead to the same overarousal. Praise and petting are often effective reinforcers for calm, settled behavior in lower distraction situations, or even in more challenging situations with puppies nearing recall. The handler should model the body language they want to see. Be calm and purposeful in your movements. Verbal praise should be slow and calm. Use a soothing tone. Food rewards can often indicate to younger puppies that there is a fun opportunity to offer behavior and earn rewards. We greatly appreciate their enthusiasm for learning and can help make it clear when it is “training time” versus “nap time” by withholding more exciting reinforcers (such as food or very enthusiastic praise) when we’d like the puppy to be calm.

#### **4) Patterns, predictability, and the “Ping-Pong” Method**

In many aspects of dog training, predictability and consistency are desirable. However, rewards for duration behaviors (like Stay, settling, or even loose leash walking) should have aspects of unpredictability and variability. Not only can a predictable pattern of rewards lead to frustration when the “promise” is unfulfilled, puppies often plateau in their progress when the criteria are constantly increasing. For example, we often hear that a baby puppy is very good at walking on loose leash for 5 steps, but any time the raiser tries to walk a little bit longer, the puppy gets distracted and pulls – or immediately after receiving a food reward, the puppy gets distracted. We joke that the handler has taught the puppy to count to 5! In reality, animals are very skilled at picking up on patterns and the puppy anticipates the reward only at these regular intervals; not before, and not after. Instead, the handler should purposely vary their rate of reward. Sometimes the puppy gets rewarded for just one step, and other times for 7, or 10 steps. This is commonly called “ping-ponging”, where you bounce back and forth between lower and higher criteria so the puppy never knows when rewards might be available.

Remember that food rewards for calm behavior should not be delivered (or needed) at a very high rate. Puppies should NOT be constantly staring at the handler when settling calmly. Please review the document on **Rewarding Calm Behavior** for further details. <https://www.guidedogs.com/uploads/files/Puppy-Raising-Manual/Food-Reward-for-Calm-Behavior-Guidelines.pdf>

With these common challenges in mind, puppies can quickly learn to be settled and well-behaved in an assortment of tempting environments. If a puppy is showing frustrative behavior or otherwise struggles with thoughtful and purposeful progressions in duration and/or calm behavior, the leader/CFR should be consulted for additional support.