

My dog isn't interested in food/ is on a restricted diet/is overweight. Can I still clicker train?

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Yes, you can. First of all, remember the click doesn't have to be followed specifically by a food treat. You can use anything your dog is willing to work for in the situation you're training in.

But although you can use alternative reinforcers, food is still one of the easiest to use in a training session because it's small, quick to deliver, and powerful. You'll find it easier to maintain a high rate of reinforcement than with other treats.

Here are some tips for using food as a reinforcer.

- Use the smallest treat you can. How small? Cheerio-size or smaller. Hot dogs can be sliced into 1/8" discs, and those slices can be cut into four—or more—pieces. You want to give your dog a taste, not fill him up.
- Train when your dog is hungry—before, rather than after, a meal.
- If your dog is on a restricted diet, use small pieces of his regular food as training treats. However, be aware it's not likely to be a very powerful reinforcer, particularly in distracting situations.

If your dog is overweight or so small that he fills up easily, dole out his daily ration one piece at a time, feeding him what's left as a meal at the end of the day.

For the short guys: treat them using a long-handled wooden kitchen spoon with sticky stuff smeared on it, such as peanut butter, strained baby food, or cream cheese.

For the pudgy guys: treat with cheerios and puffed rice flavored by being stored with nuked hotdogs or other stinky stuff. If you use kibble, reduce their meals by the same amount. Train active, calorie-burning tricks and obedience behaviors—such as heel, spin, or puppy pushups—instead of stay.

Erica Nance, New York City, NY

For a small dog on a heavy training day, place kibble in a bag mixed up with whatever treats you use—and remember to decrease the amount of kibble by the amount of treats. To make the kibble more like treats, try frying up some bacon. Then toss the kibble into the bacon fat and let it soak it up.

For dogs with weight problems, build toy drive by pairing the toy with favorite treats, by clicking and treating for interaction with the toy, and by making the toy a scarce resource that you jealously guard and have great fun with on your own. This makes for a treat that not only doesn't add calories, but actually uses them up!

Susan Mann, Wilmington, DE

What if I can't offer a food treat or if my dog isn't interested in the reward I'm offering?

A reinforcer is anything your dog is willing to work for in a given situation. As trainer, it's your job to figure out what you can offer that your dog wants in any situation. Then you can

- use what the dog wants as a reward,
- provide something the dog wants more as a reward, or
- increase the perceived value of the reward you want to use.

Complications arise when you want to provide one reinforcer but the dog wants something else that's present in the environment even more. If this happens, either change your training plan or change the environment.

Let's say, for example, that you're using your best roast chicken but your dog is more interested in passing dogs, bicycles, birds, children, joggers, etc. You can either use the opportunity to interact with the object of interest as a reinforcer or move further away from these distractions so that the reward you prefer to use becomes more important.

Another problem arises when you're restricted in what reinforcers you're allowed to use. For example, in an obedience competition, you can't bring food or toys into the ring, and obviously letting your dog interact with the judge or the cute dog in the next ring would be a really bad idea.

So what do you do? Figure out in advance what reinforcers you are going to use in the ring and increase their perceived value for your dog.

Between exercises in the obedience ring, you can praise your dog, give her pats or scratchies, celebrate with her, or ask her to perform favorite behaviors. Identify which of these behavioral reinforcers your dog enjoys the most, and choose one or more to do between exercises. Once you've decided, increase the value of these reinforcers. How? Pair them with primary reinforcers or activities your dog finds pleasurable.

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