



Encouraging Your Puppy to be Less Dependent on Food Rewards

Introduction

Food rewards are a very useful training tool, especially when we are training new cues, or when we are working in distracting environments, but we don't want our puppies to be dependent on food rewards for their entire lives. During the Foster Puppy part of their journey to becoming an assistance dog, we do not expect our puppies to be totally weaned off food rewards. Food rewards will continue to be used in the Prison Program, in their training with our Staff Trainers, and when they are initially placed in their working careers. However, if your puppy is getting close to turn-in, and there are some behaviors that are reasonably reliable, you can start thinking about a) Not always having food rewards on you, and b) Not giving a food reward for every repetition.

Weaning Yourself Off the Treat Pouch

- 🐾 In the early days with our foster puppies, we always have food rewards on us either in a treat pouch or in a pocket. Our puppies very quickly learn this and come to expect a food reward every time we reach into our treat pouch or pocket. We can do the following exercise to encourage our puppies to start responding to cues when we don't have a treat pouch with us or treats in our pocket.
- 🐾 This can be done with any cue, though it may be easiest to pick one that your puppy knows well such as Sit, Down, or Bed. Ideally your puppy should be able to hold the position for at least 10 seconds.
- 🐾 Before you begin, place your treat pouch or a handful of treats on a surface that your puppy cannot reach. They should be somewhere that you don't have to move very far to get to.

- ☐ Give your puppy a cue such as Sit, Down, or Bed.
- ☐ When they respond to the cue correctly, mark with a “Yes!” and then move to the treat location to grab a treat and give them their reward.
- ☐ If your puppy breaks position when you move to get the treat, reset them and then move to get the treat.
- ☐ Gradually (one step at a time) increase the distance you move to get the treats.

Not Giving a Food Reward for Every Repetition

In the curriculum article “Appropriate Rewards” we touched on things other than food that may be reinforcing for your puppy. These could include:

-  Petting
-  Praise
-  Toys
-  Moving forwards
-  Being released from Sit, Down, or Bed
-  Sniffing

As you work with your older foster puppy on reliable cues and behaviors, think about interspersing some other reinforcers occasionally.

For example, you are working on loose leash walking in your neighborhood. Your puppy checks in with you, you mark, with “Yes!” and reward them with a piece of kibble. A few paces later, they check in again, but this time you say “Good girl!” or “Good boy!” Then the next check in you mark and reward with food. You can then progress to a food reward every three check ins and so on.

Another example, you are working on Sit duration in the house. You ask your puppy to “Sit,” mark with “Yes,” then wait for a duration before rewarding with food and releasing. For the next repetition, instead of a food reward, throw their favorite toy as you release them. Then the next repetition, go back to a food reward and so on.

Environmental Rewards

You can also teach your foster puppy to practice good behavior for rewards in your environment. This is especially helpful if you have a puppy who struggles with food motivation, or an adolescent puppy who would prefer to sniff the ground rather than pay any attention to you.

For example, if your puppy really loves to sniff mailboxes on walks, you can make that a reward for them.

Here are some steps to help train this:

- ☐ As you are approaching the mailbox (or some other exciting item in the environment), ensure your foster puppy is walking on a loose leash. If they are pulling, turn around, move away, and wait for them to get into heel position before reapproaching. Repeat this step as many times as necessary.
- ☐ Once you are within 3-4 feet of the item, OR are able to successfully walk past it without them pulling, tell them “Yes” and “Free”.

Always make sure that you are using “Yes” and “Free” every time you are allowing them to sniff something. This ensures that they aren’t learning to pull towards things without your permission. While they are sniffing, be sure to keep slack in the leash so they aren’t being rewarded while pulling. Once they have been allowed to sniff for around 15 seconds, cue them to continue walking with “Let’s Go”.

Repeat. You can continue practicing with the same item (recommended for puppies who really struggle with pulling), or move on to practicing with something else along your walk.

Other Resources

- 🐾 [Article - Appropriate Rewards](#)
- 🐾 [Video - Leash Handling & Treat Delivery - Hints & Tips](#)
- 🐾 [Article - PAWS Approved Human Food Training Treats](#)
- 🐾 [Video - High Value Treats](#)
- 🐾 [Video - Using Toy Rewards](#)