



ARLGP FOSTER PROGRAM RESOURCES: Positive Reinforcement Training – Basic Introduction

What is it?

Positive reinforcement training is a rewards based, force free, pain free method of training that involves rewarding animals for exhibiting the behaviors we want to see and ignoring the behaviors we don't want to see.

Why do we use it?

Not only is positive reinforcement the foundation for the most effective methods of training animals, this method also reduces stress in the animal, improves the human animal-bond, decreases the likelihood of aggression (as opposed to correction or punishment based training), and generally results in a more tolerant, self-controlled, predictable pet.

What does it look like?

There are many different types of positive reinforcement based training, but in general this type of training uses rewards (food, toys, play, praise, etc.) to reinforcement desired behaviors. In addition, positive reinforcement training works to provide avenues for animals to make the right decisions on their own by altering the environment, or our own behavior, to naturally encourage desired behaviors in our pets. For example, if we know that our pet has a tendency to chew on shoes, we would make the shoes inaccessible to him or her and provide plenty of safe, appropriate toys and other items to chew on. In this way we can help our pet to make the right decision about what to chew on.

How do we do it?

When using positive reinforcement as a training method there a few steps we should take to assure success.

Step 1: Investigate – What behavior are we hoping to see? What behavior do we typically see instead? What about our pet's needs, wants, and past experiences, the environment and our own behavior is encouraging the unwanted behavior?

Example: Tucker is always getting underfoot in the kitchen when we are trying to cook.

Tucker's needs, wants and past experiences: Tucker wants food and in the past he has been allowed to stand next to his person while they cook and beg. That behavior has resulted in getting treats. When Tucker was young it was cute, but now he is very large and his presence in the kitchen makes it difficult to move around. In addition, he has recently started counter surfing (putting his paws on the counter) which has sometimes resulted in him being able to snatch food from the counter. The environment is difficult to control because it is an open plan kitchen. Removing Tucker from the kitchen would involve putting him in the back portion of the house.

Step 2: Remove opportunities for unwanted behavior to be reinforced – Positive reinforcement training is based on the idea that behaviors will be more likely to be repeated if they are reinforced. Therefore, every time we provide an opportunity for reinforcement we increase the likelihood that we will see that behavior in the future.

Example: If Tucker is allowed in the kitchen there is a possibility that food will be dropped on the floor and he will be able to get it. He will also have the opportunity to counter surf. Therefore, we must remove those opportunities. One option is to have Tucker's crate nearby and to have him stay in the crate while the family cooks. If Tucker doesn't use a crate you can try attaching his leash and securing it to a table leg. It may be difficult to control the environment in open plan homes, but if we get creative we can usually find a way.

Step 3: Encourage the behavior we want to see – We need to show animals that making the right decisions will result in good things happening. This means rewarding them for good behavior. At the beginning stages you may need to keep a treat pouch on you so that you can drop those tasty treats anytime you see your pet exhibiting good behavior. The more frequently we reward, the quicker they will begin to make the right decisions.

Example: Is Tucker resting calmly in his crate? If so, walk over and drop a small treat to him. If he is whining or barking just ignore this behavior.* As soon as he settles give him another treat. At the beginning stages you may have to reward Tucker very frequently, but over time you'll be able to reduce the frequency of the rewards.

**Your pet should not appear excessively stressed. If he is loudly or continuously whining, barking, digging at the crate or exhibiting other highly stressed behavior please contact us for help. We can still help your pet with rewards based training, but you may need some additional guidance.*

Step 4: Increase expectations – At first we will ask for very small accomplishments when beginning our training, but over time we slow and incrementally increase the challenge for our pets.

Example: Tucker is doing very well resting in his crate while we cook. We have been able to reduce how often we give him rewards and he stays calm and settled throughout. Now we want to start increasing

our expectations. Just remember, every time you increase the challenge for Tucker you need to go back to an increased reward frequency as well.

Here is an example of a progression we could use.

1. Leave the door to the crate open
2. Remove the top of the crate (airline crate) or open the side entrance (wire and collapsible crates)
3. Take Tucker's bed out of the crate and set it down where the crate was positioned. Remove the crate from the room.
4. Replace the bed with a similarly sized mat.

Is Tucker resting calmly on his mat the entire time we are cooking dinner, with only occasional reinforcement? If so we are done! We have eliminated the unwanted behavior, by replacing it with a wanted behavior.

Your Turn – Can you come up with Steps 1-4 for the following behaviors?

- Teaching your dog to stay off the couch.
- Teaching your cat not to scratch the furniture.
- Teaching your rat to stay in one location while you are cleaning his cage.

What about tricks?

But what about getting your dog to sit, shake and roll over or getting your cat to give you high five. We can teach all of these behaviors through positive reinforcement methods as well. If you are interested in learning more about this, check out our handout on marker training!

One last thing...

Not only is positive reinforcement training the method that we use here at the Animal Refuge League of Greater Portland, it is also the method that we require our foster families to use with their foster pets. Though you are not required to teach your foster animals specific behaviors like sit, down, or shake, we do encourage you to employ the principles of rewards based training in all of your interactions with her foster animal. If you're ever in doubt the easiest thing to keep in mind is that you are going to reward the behavior you want to see and ignore the behavior you don't want to see. If you have any questions about this please don't hesitate to contact us.