

NOTHING IN LIFE IS FREE

You're relaxing on the sofa reading the paper when your dog bumps your leg to get your attention. You ignore him so he plops his ball in your lap.

You ignore him again so, being a persistent pup, he sticks his head under the newspaper, making it impossible for you to read that story about what your neighbor was caught doing. Exasperated, you toss the ball for your dog. Boy, has he got you trained!

Do you wish the roles were reversed?

If so, a training technique called "Nothing in Life is Free" may be just the solution you're looking for. "Nothing in Life is Free" isn't a magic pill that will solve a specific behavior problem. Instead, it's a way of living with your dog that will help him behave better because he trusts and accepts you as his leader and is confident knowing his place in the family.

What is "Nothing in Life is Free"?

You have resources—food, treats, toys, and attention. Your dog wants those resources. Make him earn them. That's the basis of "Nothing in Life is Free." When your dog does what you want, he gets rewarded with the thing he wants.

You may also hear this aspect of training called "No Free Lunch" or "Say Please." Those are just other names for "Nothing in Life is Free."

How to practice "Nothing in Life is Free"

1. First, use positive reinforcement methods to teach your dog a few commands and/or tricks. "Sit," "Down," "Come," and "Stay" are useful commands. "Shake," "Speak," and "Roll over" are fun tricks to teach your dog.
2. Stop giving away resources. Do you mindlessly pet your dog for no reason? Stop. Your attention is a valuable resource to your dog. Don't give it away. Make him earn it.
3. Once your dog has mastered a few commands, you can begin to practice "Nothing In Life Is Free."

Before you give your dog anything (food, a treat, a walk, etc.) he must first perform one of the commands he has learned. For example:

- In order for you to put your dog's leash on to go for a walk, he must sit until you've put the leash on.
- When you feed your dog, he must sit and stay until you've put the bowl on the floor.
- Play a game of fetch after work and make your dog sit and "shake hands" each time you throw the toy.

- Rub your dog's belly while watching TV, but make him lie down and roll over before being petted.

4. Once you've given the command, don't give your dog what he wants until he does what you want. If he refuses to perform the command, don't give in. Be patient and remember that eventually he will have to obey your command to get what he wants.

5. Make sure your dog knows the command well and understands what you want before you begin practicing "Nothing in Life is Free."

The benefits of this technique

Requiring your dog to work for everything he wants is a safe, positive, non-confrontational way to establish your leadership position.

Even if your dog never displays aggressive behavior such as growling, snarling, or snapping, he can still manipulate you. He may be affectionate to the point of being "pushy," such as nudging your hand to be petted or "worming" his way onto the furniture to be close to you. This technique gently reminds the dog that he must abide by your rules.

Fearful dogs may become more confident by obeying commands. As they succeed in learning more tricks, their continued success will increase confidence and ultimately lead them to feeling more comfortable and less stressed.

Why this technique works

Dogs want good stuff. If the only way to get it is to do what you ask, they'll do it.

Good leadership encourages good behavior by providing the guidance and boundaries dogs need.

Practicing "Nothing in Life is Free" gently and effectively communicates to your dog that you are the leader because you control all the resources.

POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT

Remember how happy you were if your parents gave you a dollar for every A on your report card? They made you want to do it again, right? That's positive reinforcement.

Dogs don't care about money. They care about praise ... and food. Positive reinforcement training uses praise and/or treats to reward your dog for doing something you want him to do. Because the reward makes him more likely to repeat the behavior, positive reinforcement is one of your most powerful tools for shaping or changing your dog's behavior.

Rewarding your dog for good behavior sounds pretty simple, and it is! But to practice the technique effectively, you need to follow some basic guidelines.

Timing is everything

Correct timing is essential when using positive reinforcement.

- The reward must occur immediately—within seconds—or your pet may not associate it with the proper action. For example, if you have your dog sit but reward him after he's stood back up, he'll think he's being rewarded for standing up.
- Using a clicker to mark the correct behavior can improve your timing and also help your dog understand the connection between the correct behavior and the treat.

Keep it short

Dogs don't understand sentences. "Daisy, I want you to be a good girl and sit for me now" will likely earn you a blank stare.

Keep commands short and uncomplicated. The most commonly used dog commands are:

- watch me
- sit
- stay
- down (which means "lie down")
- off (which means "get off of me" or "get off the furniture")
- stand
- come
- heel (which means "walk close to my side")
- leave it

Consistency is key

Everyone in the family should use the same commands; otherwise, your dog may be confused. It might help to post a list of commands where everyone can become familiar with them.

Consistency also means always rewarding the desired behavior and never rewarding undesired behavior.

When to use positive reinforcement

The good: Positive reinforcement is great for teaching your dog commands, and it's also a good way of reinforcing good behavior. You may have your dog sit

- before letting him out the door (which helps prevent door-darting)
- before petting him (which helps prevent jumping on people)
- before feeding him (which helps teach him good meal-time manners).

Give him a pat or a "Good dog" for lying quietly by your feet, or slip a treat into a Kong®-type toy when he's chewing it instead of your shoe.

The bad: Be careful that you don't inadvertently use positive reinforcement to reward unwanted behaviors. For example, if you let your dog outside every time he barks at a noise in the neighborhood, you're giving him a reward (access to the yard) for behavior you want to discourage.

Shaping behavior

It can take time for your dog to learn certain behaviors. You may need to use a technique called "shaping," which means reinforcing something close to the desired response and then gradually requiring more from your dog before he gets the treat.

For example, if you're teaching your dog to "shake hands," you may initially reward him for lifting his paw off the ground, then for lifting it higher, then for touching your hand, then for letting you hold his paw, and finally, for actually "shaking hands" with you.

Types of rewards

Positive reinforcement can include food treats, praise, petting, or a favorite toy or game. Since most dogs are highly food-motivated, food treats work especially well for training.

- A treat should be enticing and irresistible to your pet. Experiment a bit to see which treats work best for your pet.
- It should be a very small (pea-size or even smaller for little dogs), soft piece of food, so that he will immediately gulp it down and look to you for more. Don't give your dog something he has to chew or that breaks into bits and falls on the floor.
- Keep a variety of treats handy so your dog won't become bored getting the same treat every time. You can carry the treats in a pocket or fanny pack.
- Each time you use a food reward, you should couple it with a verbal reward (praise). Say something like, "Yes!" or "Good dog," in a positive, happy tone of voice. Then give your dog a treat.

If your dog isn't as motivated by food treats, a toy, petting, or brief play can be very effective rewards.

When to give treats

When your pet is learning a new behavior, reward him every time he does the behavior. This is called continuous reinforcement.

Once your pet has reliably learned the behavior, you want to switch to intermittent reinforcement, in which you continue with praise, but gradually reduce the number of times he receives a treat for doing the desired behavior.

- At first, reward him with the treat four out of every five times he does the behavior. Over time, reward him three out of five times, then two out of five times, and so on, until you're only rewarding him occasionally.
- Continue to praise him every time—although once your dog has learned the behavior, your praise can be less effusive, such as a quiet but positive, "Good dog."
- Use a variable schedule of reinforcement so that he doesn't catch on that he only has to respond every other time. Your pet will soon learn that if he keeps responding, eventually he'll get what he wants—your praise and an occasional treat.

Caution! Don't decrease the rewards too quickly. You don't want your dog to become frustrated.

By understanding positive reinforcement, you'll see that you're not forever bound to carry a pocketful of goodies. Your dog will soon be working for your verbal praise, because he wants to please you and knows that, occasionally, he'll get a treat, too.