

WHY SHOULD I..... ...MOTIVATE MY DOG?



How much would someone have to pay you to jump into the sea on a cold winter's day?? What would it take for you to take the plunge into the bitterly cold ocean???. Some of us might jump at the chance of the exhilarating dip and be satisfied with a warm drink afterwards, some may say they'd go in for £100, £500 or even a £1000, and there are those whose response would be "what are you mad no amount of money would get me in the water its freezing". We are all different and require various levels of motivation and reward to perform the same task and our dogs are exactly the same.

Dogs only do what they find rewarding and it is this 'reward' that motivates them to repeat the action. A 'reward' can be something positive such as a pat, smile or titbit but it can also be something negative such as a smack, a glare or a raised voice. (Dogs also find lots of behaviour such as socialising, digging, jumping up and barking 'inherently' rewarding i.e. they are 'normal' behaviours and therefore enjoyable for the dog to practise.) The key to any training therefore is to find out what motivates your dog and then use this as a reward to reinforce and encourage good behaviour.

Motivating and rewarding your dog is not bribery.

Expecting your dog to perform specific behaviours simply because they love you is unrealistic and unfair to you and them. You would not expect a child to perform a hand stand without first coaching them on how to do so.

Do you know what motivates *your* dog?

What your dog finds rewarding may not necessarily be obvious to you. Don't assume that because the packet says your dog will like it he will. If you are struggling to train your dog it may be that you have yet to identify his favourite rewards and motivations making it very hard for yourself to teach him anything new. If this is the case (and even if you think it isn't) it is always advisable to invest some time in discovering what your dog really loves and seeking out their greatest motivations. When identifying what really makes your dog tick, it is only the response of your dog that is important.

FOOD - what sort e.g. hotdogs, chicken, liver cake, dog biscuits

- Like all incentives, chosen titbits need to be desirable to the dog. It is the SMELL that motivates - not the process of eating. Smelly is best e.g. liver
- Titbits need to be easy to deliver and easy to digest.
- Food should be visible when flicked on the floor.
- Size of titbits should be relative to the dog

- Higher value food should be used to teach a new behaviour or in distracting situations e.g. a training class / at the park. Their own food can be used at home.

PETTING AND PATTING - where and how e.g. chin stroke, ear rub, gentle touch

- This really depends on what the dog - not the owner - finds rewarding. Some dogs enjoy physical contact, others do not. Some might like a scratch on the ear, but would hate a cuddle. Some find all physical contact irritating while others relish the hands on interaction.

TOYS - which e.g. shop bought, home made, food toys, soft toys, slippers!

- Toys can be intrinsically rewarding - a dog may simply enjoy the feel of it in its mouth.
- Squeaky toys can be rewarding - but they are not good in a class situation and can sometimes over stimulate dogs such as terriers.
- They are a good reward where a dog needs to relieve stress or enjoy themselves alone.
- Tuggy games are good for teaching self-control. When used as a reward in training, a game of 3-5 seconds is sufficient.

LIFE REWARDS - natural behaviours - digging, barking, playing with dogs

- Owners do not necessarily have control over these rewards - eg greeting other dogs, chasing seagulls or rabbits, sniffing a great scent etc. all of which are inherently rewarding due to a dog's hard wiring. These are hard, but not impossible, to compete with.

PRAISE - how e.g. verbal (soft or loud, gentle or enthusiastic) or visual (smiling)

- Surprisingly praise has to be trained to be meaningful to the dog - it has to be linked to the dog's positive emotional state throughout its life. If someone said 'I love you while holding a gun to your head' the I Love You would not be rewarding but in fact would make you anxious.
- Some dogs can become over-excited; others are completely immune. To a dog living in a noisy household praise can pass them by as just 'white noise' (try whispering praise)
- It is a good standby in the absence of other rewards.

A great identification game to play involves two members of the family armed with a variety of rewards, including themselves, competing to see who can keep the attention of the dog for longest. You can then note down what kept the dog enthusiastic for longest was it a piece of ham or maybe a silly human jumping up and down and speaking in a squeaky voice! Once you have your list of at least 8 rewards keep the best ones for situations where you are asking a lot of your dog, such as a recall in the park where you need to offer more than just a biscuit!