

SAR Training Using Food Rewards

One of the most debated issues in search & rescue dog training is whether to use food as a reward. I've never quite understood why some people are against food reward – food is a basic survival necessity and clearly one of the easiest and strongest reward systems we can use in shaping dog behavior. Granted, there are exceptions to the rule, but most dogs will work eagerly for food/treats. Of great importance is the “value” (to the dog) of the food being offered as the reward, and



in some cases, that value may need to be higher than was initially offered to be successful. For example, dry dog biscuits are quite low on the reward value scale. Steak, chicken, hot dogs or other very moist, tasty, tidbits such as cheese score much higher. Often, to give the dog incentive to master a new, or more challenging task, it may be necessary to start with a higher value treat. Once the behavior is learned, it can be maintained with a low value treat. Size of rewards also can matter when the dog is nervous or hesitant – a larger offering may be what motivates the dog forward. Later on, after the task has been successfully mastered, then the amount, value, and frequency of the reward can be adjusted (variable reward) with an occasional [surprise] jackpot/high value reward given often enough to maintain the reliability of the behavior. As always, there are exceptions to the rule, and there are a few dogs who love food SO much that they have difficulty concentrating on the successful completion of the task to be rewarded. For these individuals, a food based reward system may not be the most appropriate.

Generally speaking, lower value treats, which can often be employed for the maintenance of an already learned behavior, are less caloric (to the dog) and cost less for the handler, but may not be sufficient for the initial learning phase. For example, when teaching a dog to climb a ladder, we may use hot dogs or steak, but once that skill is mastered we can often offer the same dog a dry treat or a carrot and it will be just as happy to perform the skill for us. The treat is only a part of the reward to the dog. It comes from the handler, and with that is knowledge of the handler's happiness with the dog / behavior through verbal (praise) or tactile (petting) rewards in combination with the offering of the treat. In many cases, food, verbal, tactile, and play can make an extremely powerful and effective reward system – both individually and in combination with one another- that motivates the dog to continue performing a reliable, energetic, and consistent behavior, or sequence of behaviors.



Dogs who are not given treats as rewards often still attempt to eat food when it becomes available, especially if the handler is not paying attention. It is always of interest to me when a handler, who is adamantly against using food rewards, isn't paying attention to his /her dog and it takes the opportunity to snack on a dropped morsel or scarfs down easily available food such as an unsupervised potato chip bag. My first time hiding in a FEMA bark barrel, I forgot I had loose treats in my BDU pocket. When the dog got to the barrel I heard crunching for a while before

SAR Training Using Food Rewards

the barking started. I, of course, felt bad for having inadvertently dropped the treats, but had to laugh as the handler, who was so against dogs ever having treats, watched his dog cleaning up all of the treats before performing the trained indication (barking). Another teammate's dog scarfed down chips during a mock deployment search despite that handler being adamantly against food rewards. Instinctively, dogs are opportunistic scavengers and know that food is critical to their survival. Dogs will eat things humans don't want them to...just ask any veterinarian! It doesn't matter if it is a food or toy reward dog, they will scavenge and sometimes eat available food items. The opposite is also true - that many food reward dogs will focus on searching and ignore food in the search area. As noted earlier, food reward is more than just the treat – it is about the handler giving it to the dog as a paycheck / reward for a job well done. There is a big difference, and in a well bonded handler / dog team, the dog seems aware of the higher value when the reward comes from its handler.

There is a myth that food reward dogs don't hold up to toy reward dogs. I can't imagine why anyone would think this as again, food is a basic necessity for survival and the reason behind their development of hunt and prey drives. The dog hunts prey in order to eat. There is a reason federal working dog programs often use food as the reward system. I have found dogs on food reward work harder and persevere longer than toy reward dogs. Playing with toys takes a lot of energy and if the dog is tired, hot, or injured, it may not want to play. Dogs when hot and tired often do not have the energy to chase a ball or play tug yet they will still want and take food rewards. Even with my toy reward dogs, I also use food reward as part of the variable reward system. This builds more drive to work. Those who insist that a dog must work only for toys are not thinking realistically. The handler may have a personal preference for toy rewarding but that is his / her preference, not the necessarily what will motivate that dog the best or the make the dog reliable under all circumstances.



The food reward must be high value enough to motivate the dog. Each individual dog will set the value level necessary for each task – for both the learning stages and the continued performance of that task.

When using food you may need to cut back on the daily kibble for two reasons: first is to avoid excessive calories making your working dog fat, and second so their hunger helps build drive and desire to work (especially in the early stages of learning). My labs are endless garbage disposals and would eat unlimited amounts if allowed. They had extreme food drive no matter how much they had already eaten. One is only food reward, the other two have been food and toy rewards. My Malinois likes food as her reward, but I do reduce her regular food intake to insure that food desire remains high. While that may not be necessary (I'm not sure it is as she will always eat), it does seem to make her more attentive

SAR Training Using Food Rewards

and enthusiastic in performing solicited behaviors, leading me to believe it must make the food reward more valuable to her.

The Malinois has also developed a multi-reward system depending on what task we are doing. For obedience and agility I can use food, toy, or both. For directionals, she only wants a toy (ball) reward. Give her food and she refuses it and gives me a look like 'what was I thinking and where is my ball'? At HRD sources she may watch her ball go by, but she lays there forever waiting for food (which has been her primary reward / reinforcer for that behavior). She is starting



FEMA work and while the tug toy was ok to play around with, it wasn't high value enough reward for her to push through difficult tasks – but food is. My toy-only reward friends were amazed at the difference in her performance when I switched to using a food stuffable toy for the bark at live subjects. A dog on their team was about to be washed out, until the handler tried the food in a soft toy. Now that dog is shocking everyone with its performance. They are beginning to understand the importance of **discovering and utilizing what works (is highly rewarding) for each individual dog, regardless of breed or handler preference. The old saying, “the dog picks the reward” needs to be followed by handlers if they want the best out of their dogs.**

There are some disadvantages inherent in toy reward systems. One drawback to toy reward is you have to always have the appropriate toy reward on hand, or retrieve it when you get called out. Pretty much anywhere and anytime, food is available or can be easily obtained. Toy rewards tire out the dog, and in doing so, can limit the number of repetitions of a behavior / length of training time. Toy rewards disengage the dog from the source it is searching for (other than live find where, of course, the subject may play with / reward the dog). Toy rewards make multiple fast reinforcements difficult, whereas with food the dog can repeat the behavior fast and be “instantly” rewarded and ready to go again. An example would be to teach the dog to touch the source for a “Show Me” command. Every time the dog touches the source with its paw or nose a marker can immediately be given (clicker or verbal marker) and a reward delivered. The dog doesn't have to move for the reward and the behavior can be repeated without interruption.

Toys do allow us to “jackpot” the dog in a way food simply can't by itself. Food is too instantaneous and to help strengthen the reward (and thus the behavior you are teaching); at times you may need to lengthen the duration of the reward session. Toys allow the rewarding to be prolonged in duration and, if needed, help pull the dog away from the source without the dog 'leaving' the source mentally. For example, the dog has made the find and given its trained indication. Now you need to get the dog away from the source and out of the area. By playing, you can move the dog out of the sector



SAR Training Using Food Rewards

without the dog trying to go back to the source or having to actually prompt the dog to abandon the source. You want the dog to always go directly to source when it smells it, so it is up to the handler to not let the dog linger near any scent when not actively seeking it out to make a find.

For toy reward dogs, I treat when doing successive finds such as line ups so not to interrupt the line up search process. I then use the toy as the jackpot reward at the end to give the dog a big finish and to remove the dog from the search and scent source area.



For dogs who have problems with handler cues or for handlers who can't master rewarding without giving off cues or to expand the distance between the dog and the handler at finds – putting the food in a stuffable toy is the perfect solution. This also allows rewarding at source without leaving a mess for the dogs that will follow during training exercises. Handlers should use only non-flaking treats but even with items such as hot dogs, some will drop

eventually leaving yummy smells that may distract another dog. Also for situations such as on rubble piles, you don't want loose food that may drop into a crevasse or the subject is in a spot without easy hand access to the dog yet they can push a toy through an opening. Dogs quickly learn the treats are inside the toy. They will now have an additional, visual cue to go to work – seeing the reward toy.

The handler can now reward without coming physically close to the dog (pick a toy that is stuffable but also tossable). This helps create more independent dogs as well as allows rewarding the dog immediately when the handler can't physically get close to the dog such as a dog that has climbed a high ladder to a high plank walk. The handler can reward the tough skill of ladder climbing by tossing the stuffed toy up to the dog on the plank with better chances the dog will catch the reward. Then by the dog carrying the toy the dog gets a longer reward period. It also evokes the natural prey instinct of catching the prey, carrying the prey, and 'eating' the prey as the dog eats the treats inside the toy... and "possession" of an item ranks high on most dog's value list. I see increased motivation when a stuffable toy is used. Many dogs prefer to take the toy away to eat the contents. This is their natural prey behavior of possessing the kill. Look for stuffable toys (Velco is wonderful stuff!) where the dog can open the toy unassisted by a human. The Dr. Noys duck is a perfect example as dogs put one paw on a wing, and use their teeth to pull the other wing, opening the duck's Velcro and allowing access to the food.



SAR Training Using Food Rewards

Using a stuffable toy, the food reward dog will learn to tug as it now tugs at this toy to possess it in order to obtain the real reward of the food inside. Tugging extends the reward duration; so does the dog carrying the food stuffed toy back to its crate/vehicle or just away from the source location. For some dogs, they will also play a retrieve game with the stuffed toy. Also



putting the food inside a toy may save either the subject's or handler's fingers if the dog is overly enthusiastic in taking the treats. Stuffable toys offer all the benefits of a toy to a food reward dog (and to open minded handlers, as well!). Treats are excellent for immediate gratification; toys and/or stuffable toys extend the reward and further build that reward system.

Ultimately, it doesn't matter which reward system you use. All that matters is that the dog loves the reward and wants it so badly it will reliably do anything, at any time, to obtain it. The dog must also love the hunting / search game, which, to a good working dog, the hunt becomes rewarding in and of itself, same with the find. The mere act of searching is rewarding to the dog. Dogs that do well are dogs that love the search, the finding, and the reward interaction with the handler (or the subject). If those are not solid, the dog will be unreliable at times no matter if it has been trained using food or toy rewards. Watch dogs that, when loose, search & find on their own without the handler even aware of what the dog is doing. Those dogs love the entire game, and the reward – whether food, toy, or a combination of the two – becomes the icing on the cake.



ANY reward or combination of reward types will work, as long as it is HIGHLY REWARDING TO THAT PARTICULAR DOG. When everything is said and done, the dog must search, find, and give its trained indication regardless of the circumstances... if it does that consistently and reliably, then that is what truly matters most – not what reward type was given to the dog for performing the task.