A person and dog with leashes

Description automatically generated

**Chapter 10: Introduction to Using Food Reward in Guidework**

In this chapter, we’ll start by talking about some of the differences between today’s training methods and the traditional methods historically used to train guide dogs. You’ll learn why and how positive reinforcement techniques gained popularity, specifically the use of food reward in training. We’ll also discuss techniques and scenarios in which food reward will be especially useful and give plenty of tips and reminders to help you learn to use food reward effectively with your new guide.

Before we go into an explanation of how the food reward system works it will be important and useful to address the time when food reward was not utilized. Experienced guide dog users and trainers can clearly remember the old adage that dogs should never work for food. This was a very ingrained philosophy in the early period of dog guide training and maintained a strong hold for many years to follow. Guide dog handlers and trainers were under the common belief that using food for training would only teach the dogs to scavenge, that the dogs should want to obey their master without needing anything more than a bit of praise or petting as reward. Of course, the best trainers understood how to make themselves highly valuable to the dog and could achieve good results. But these were skills built through many years of experience and were often difficult to transfer to newer handlers. Much of the dogs training relied on aversive punishment and compulsion techniques, and dogs who were unable to understand and comply with the training were often labeled as stubborn, spiteful, or just plain dumb.

Thankfully, as human’s understanding of animals improved, so did our dog training methods. The guide dog industry was actually one of the last facets of dog training to give up the old notion that dogs should never work for food. But, in the last twenty years or so, guide dog schools have learned that this, in fact, is not the case and that food reward can hold quite a lot of merit. Many schools entered into the use of food reward gradually, initially using it to work through fear-based issues, and in areas such as escalator work, riding buses and subways or walking over various surface changes.

In the past, most distraction work, whether it be ignoring loose dogs or not picking up items off the street, was handled with traditional aversive techniques. However, as the food training progressed, it was found that using food reward as a counter conditioning technique proved to be extremely effective with distraction work. In addition, it was discovered that food could be useful with patterning and maintaining working drive through the methods of back chaining and variable reinforcement.

Ultimately, we found that balancing some traditional methods with a food reward system enabled the handler to connect more quickly and get more effective work out of their dogs. Trainers were able to take a much more positive approach to teaching new behaviors and the dogs stayed more engaged and learned faster. Skills transferred to new handlers and relationships grew faster and stronger through the use of food reward.

Today, food is utilized as a primary reinforcer in nearly every aspect of guide dog training and handlers are expected to learn how to use it effectively and continue to do so consistently as the relationship grows with a new dog.

**Guidelines for using food reward**

There are some general rules that apply to most situations where food reward is utilized. As you work toward becoming proficient in your handling, it will be beneficial to keep these guidelines in mind.

* Your treat pouch should be positioned on your right side, at your hip or slightly behind. It should easily accessible. This might mean wearing it over your clothing or opting to keep food in a coat pocket or other accessible location.
* Prepare to deliver a treat by placing the treat between the index and middle finger and gently depressing the thumb over it. Place your treat filled hand just under the dog’s chin, then remove your thumb and allow the dog to take the treat.
* DO NOT “pre-load” your feeding hand. This can cause the dog to look for the treat before the behavior is done. The treat should only be reached for after the behavior has been completed. Using an event marker (“Yes” or clicker) with good timing will be much more effective and give you time to get out a treat. Event markers will be discussed in more detail in a later chapter.
* Food reward should only be delivered to your dog in the correct position. The dog should not break position to move toward your treat hand. This means you must bring your hand all the way to the dog’s position, often reaching across your body to keep the dog at your left side.
* Guiding Eyes will provide standard and high value treats that you can use during class. You can also use a portion of your dog's kibble ration as training treats throughout the day, which is a good practice for when you go home as well. High value treats should only be used as recommended by an instructor.
* Food reward is NOT a substitute for genuine, meaningful praise both verbal and physical.

Next, we’ll talk about some specific areas where using food reward will be useful, and the techniques that you will be learning as you work with your new dog.

**Relationship Building**

Building a strong relationship with your dog will set the stage for how well you and your dog can work as a team. By using food reward, a primary reinforcer that has great value to the dog, you can help to accelerate the bonding process. Of course, your dog will begin to view you as valuable as soon as you feed him his first meal. But we can take it a step further by consistently using food reward for specific behaviors and focus. It is the anticipation of receiving food in the dog’s mind that helps to motivate it. As you are learning how to provide meaningful praise for your dog, food reward helps the dog to not only understand but accept both the verbal and physical praise that it is receiving from its new handler.

One technique that you will find useful in many situations throughout training is the “Touch” game. This is an all-positive behavior that simply asks your dog to touch your closed fist with its nose to earn a reward. There is no consequence for noncompliance. This is a great game to practice during down time in a variety of locations. The better your dog gets at this game, the more useful it will be later on when teaching new targets or working through distraction.

**Playing “Touch”**

* + **Step #1** Give the cue word “Touch” and present a closed fist to your dog. As soon as the dog reaches out and makes contact with your fist, mark with “Yes” and then food reward. Do this 3-4 times. Remember that every touch earns a treat.
  + **Step #2** Next, present the closed fist in different locations, a bit farther away so your dog has to move a bit to touch it. As the dog makes contact with your fist, mark with “Yes” and then food reward. Do this several times. Remember to give the verbal cue first before presenting your fist.
  + **Step #3** Continue to increase the challenge of the game by presenting the closed fist in various locations near your body, to the right, to the left, down near the floor, up near your waist. Try switching hands so your dog learns to really look for the target hand. And practice in a variety of locations, different rooms, outside, etc.
  + **Step #4** As your dog becomes very proficient at the game, you can increase the challenge even more by asking for multiple touches before rewarding. Start with just 2-3 touches to earn reward, moving your target hand between touches. Keep it variable to keep your dog engaged.
  + If you find that your dog is not having success practicing the “Touch” game, think about how you can make the game a bit easier for him. Perhaps present the target fist closer to your dog, use his name to get his attention, move away from distractions, or make sure you are rewarding with food for every touch. Remember that this should be an all positive fun game. If you feel that you and your dog are having trouble with it, please consult an instructor for assistance.

**Patterning, targeting, and back chaining**

These terms all refer to how the dogs learn new routes and guidework skills. By using food reward, we can easily increase the significance of specific locations like curbs, doors, signal buttons or anything else that it would be helpful to have the dog indicate. Your dogs have already been trained to have a general understanding of curbs, doors and steps, but by using these techniques you will be able to teach them to help you locate anything from a mailbox to an intersecting path, even your hotel room when traveling.

While training with your new dog, you will be reinforcing their work pattern by offering food reward at curbs and other known targets. As your working relationship grows, instructors will help you recognize when it is appropriate to reward with food and when it is not. You will also have the opportunity to teach new targets using backchaining. To use this technique, you will start at the target, use the “Touch” game to teach the dog that the target is significant, then move back in small increments and allow the dog to approach the target location. This will be discussed in more detail in an upcoming chapter.

**Counter conditioning for animal and food distraction**

For our purposes, counter conditioning refers to the techniques we use to teach the dogs that the handler is more valuable and interesting than the distraction. These techniques allow new handlers to take an active role in establishing and maintaining positive control over their dog in the presence of distractions. The ideal response is that when the dog notices something interesting in the environment, it chooses to engage with the handler or move away rather than pursuing the distraction. This can be quite difficult for the dogs as many other stress factors can contribute to a dog’s level of distraction. However, by using food reward, we can build an understanding in the dog that they can choose to ignore distraction in favor of reward. Positive reinforcement can be used together with traditional techniques to achieve lasting results. This is an area where timing and reading your dog is necessary, and it’s important to understand how food reward works. If used consistently, this method is much more powerful than using aversive methods alone which the dog will often learn to ignore in favor of something they find more motivating. When dealing with normal day to day distractions, you will be learning to use a combination of techniques. At times, you will need to use leash corrections to curb any lunging or overexcitement, maintain control, and regain your dog's focus. However, this will always be balanced with praise and positive reinforcement. A big part of reward-based training is also to catch your dog doing things correctly. We often discuss rewarding active behaviors such as responding to a direct command, but a handler needs to stay aware and take the opportunity to reward passive behaviors as well. In other words, if your dog is sitting by your side and does not move as another dog walks by, you should offer food reward because your dog has done exactly as it should. Same if your dog walks by a discarded pizza crust and chooses to stay connected with you or continue working rather than dive for the crust, that is a rewardable response. Of course, you will not always be able to recognize these moments, but your dog is making these little decisions all day long and it's important to catch them and reward your dog as often as possible so he stays motivated to keep making good decisions. Otherwise, he will soon figure out that grabbing that pizza crust or going to visit that other dog is a guaranteed reward, even if he faces consequences after the fact.

**Counter Conditioning Step-by-Step**

Every distraction situation will have unique challenges, but there are some general guidelines to follow. Instructors will work with each team and will also intentionally set out distractions to challenge you and your dog. This provides a great opportunity to take the time to work through the steps properly.

* **Step #1** Always be aware of your environment. Many times you will be able to anticipate an upcoming distraction from audible cues (barking dog, jingling tags, group of children, etc) or you can assume distraction will be present in specific areas (I.e. food on the floor in a cafeteria, or scent distractions in a park.) Take this opportunity to check in with your dog, talk to them, reach down and touch them if you are stationary, maybe even give the command “Stay” as a reminder. If you are working your dog, use verbal encouragement while staying in good following position to keep your dog focused. You may also choose to have your dog “Wait” and hold a stationary position while the distraction passes. Remember, if your dog chooses not to engage with distraction, you should reward with food and praise.
* **Step #2** There will be times when you cannot anticipate the distraction, or your dog chooses to engage despite your early efforts to intervene. He may lunge toward the distraction, deviate from his line of travel, refuse to go in the desired direction, or drop his head to sniff or attempt to scavenge. In this case you must first reestablish control and focus. A leash correction is warranted in response to the dog lunging or dropping its head but should be immediately followed by redirection in the form of a command (“Sit” or “Down”). These are known as “control positions”, and the sooner you can establish a control position, the better off you’ll be.
* **Step #3** Once your dog is under physical control, you’ll want to reestablish their focus. This step is especially important if you are working your dog. They will not be able to guide effectively if they are still focused on the barking dog that is now behind you. One of the best ways to regain your dog’s focus is to ask for position changes, perhaps even asking your dog to come into heel position facing away from the distraction. You can follow up with leash corrections as needed until you can achieve rewardable responses, meaning your dog is responding consistently on the first cue. Another great tool to use here is the Touch Game (above). You can think of this as a test of your dog’s focus. If they can respond to “Touch” a few times on the first cue to get food reward, then they are probably ready for the next step. If they cannot respond, they’re not ready. Remember there is no correction for Touch, so you’ll need to go back to obedience commands to gain compliance.
* **Step #4** Once you’ve got your dog's focus, you’re ready to carry on with whatever you were doing in the first place. If the distraction is still present (especially while working on campus) it’s a good opportunity to practice counter conditioning with your dog. Walk back and forth, working through the steps, until you dog can choose not to engage, and you can reward heavily. The more difficulty your dog has with a particular distraction, the more important it becomes for you to balance with lots of meaningful praise once your dog is successful.

\*Note: Timing is extremely important when utilizing counter conditioning. Dogs can easily chain behaviors together, and it's very easy to inadvertently reward distracted behaviors. Instructors will work closely with you in early stages to help you learn how to time your food rewards effectively.

**Variable food reward**

By now you are probably wondering if you will have to carry food with you all the time for the rest of your dog’s career. Well, the short answer is no. But the long answer is that initially, yes, you should try to have some food reward on you whenever your dog is with you. It’s important that you be as consistent as possible with your dog as you are getting to know each other, and part of that is consistently rewarding good behavior so your dog trusts that you will be a fair and consistent handler. As your relationship develops and your dog is responding consistently well, your instructors will have you start moving to a variable reinforcement schedule. First, you will start being more particular about rewardable responses, offering food only for the best behaviors, then moving to rewarding randomly. By alternating or varying when the food reward is given will help to keep your dog motivated, fresh and alert. A variable reward is similar to the slot machine concept at a casino. The player is never sure when he will receive a payout or better yet the jackpot. This keeps his interest and makes him keep trying. A variable food reward works similarly with dogs. In the hope of being rewarded, they will work harder. Intervals between rewards must be built slowly so the dog continues to believe they will be rewarded eventually, but it is possible for well-established teams to work effectively with very minimal food reward. You will always need to use meaningful praise to keep your dog engaged and motivated. It’s also important to understand that food reward should be increased any time something changes for the dog, such as teaching new routes or targets, change of environment, etc. This is the reason that you as new handlers will begin by using a high rate of food rewards. Lots of things have changed for your dogs, and food reward plays a major role in smoothing out that transition.

**Handling fear-based exposure issues**

Positive reinforcement can be highly effective in overcoming fear in dogs and other animals. At some point, you may encounter a situation where your dog exhibits fear. In some instances, such as loud noises (trucks, sirens, etc) you may be able to preempt fear by using food reward to reassure, reward calmness and build a positive association. At other times, you may not be able to identify why your dog is acting fearful. In this case, it will likely be necessary to seek some assistance. A sighted friend or family member may be able to provide some insight, but it is often best to contact Guiding Eyes for professional advice. An instructor will talk to you about what is going on and may ask for more information or video footage if possible. They can then help you develop a plan to help your dog overcome their fear. This plan will likely include the use of food reward to help change the dog's perception of whatever is triggering their fear.

*Updated Sept 2020*