

Don't Jump on Grandma

One of the things about adjusting our dogs' behavior is that they decide what they find rewarding. For most dogs getting pushed away when they jump is enormously rewarding. They get attention, touch, and the opportunity to sniff stuff that they don't get to sniff with all four feet on the floor. If we tell them "no" we give them attention, and if we push them away the "game" can make them jump with greater enthusiasm. For some dogs our pushing against jumping can even plant the seeds of aggression.

If we *completely* ignore our dogs' jumping they will begin to jump less.

We can speed the process considerably, though, by rewarding them for the behavior we'd prefer *before* they jump! Every time our dogs think about jumping but are rewarded while still having four feet on the floor, they learn that it's rewarding not to jump.



Click!

One terrific tool for helping our dogs know what behaviors are rewarded is a clicker, a little device that makes a neutral noise to mark what behaviors pay off. This gives us a little time to deliver the treat—the "paycheck".

In the above example of the jumping dog we want to mark the good behavior—keeping all four feet on the floor at times that are super exciting. If I see my pup Pogo head toward me with that about-to-jump look in his eye, I will click before he has a chance to jump, then deliver a tiny tasty treat to the floor.

The click tells Pogo that he is being rewarded for keeping all four paws on the floor. The treat is the payoff for which he is working. I put the treat on the floor, or deliver it just below his mouth, to reinforce the idea that good things come from down low, rather than from jumping.

Rewarding our dogs for good behavior before they have a chance to do “bad” things can go a long way to avoiding problems down the road. A fun thing to do is to catch your dog in the act of doing something you like, and rewarding him. See if you can come up with five things to reward in a day, an afternoon, an hour!

Preemptive Reinforcement

This approach of catching our dogs in the act of doing what we want *before* they have a chance to do what we don't want can be applied to a number of challenges.

Does Taz like to help himself to what's on the counter?

Put a blanket, rug, or mat in a corner of the kitchen, and teach him that all good things come to dogs who lie quietly on their mats. Toss a treat on the mat, and click when he steps on it to get the treat. Click and treat a few times to reinforce the miracle of food appearing for dogs who are on mats. Next, toss a treat away from the mat while saying his release word (“okay”, “free”, etc.) and when he goes to get it start the exercise all over again.

Does Muffy enjoy lounging on the forbidden couch?

Reward her for being on the floor before she has a chance to get on the furniture, and provide her with her own place to lounge that has some of the features of the couch (comfort, proximity to or distance from household activity, etc.).

Some improvements may take a little time, but others may be surprisingly quick. Have fun catching your dog in the act ... of behaving!