



BEHAVIOR
SERIES

Nothing in Life Is Free

A Training Technique for Dogs

D OES YOUR DOG GET ON THE FURNITURE and refuse to get off? Nudge your hand and insist on being petted or played with? Refuse to come when called? Defend his food bowl or toys from you?

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” is not 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.

How to Practice “Nothing in Life Is Free”

- Use positive reinforcement methods to teach your dog a few commands and tricks. “Sit,” “Down,” and “Stay” are useful commands. “Shake,” “Speak,” and “Roll over” are fun tricks to teach your dog.
- 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, a pat on the head), he must first perform one of the commands he has learned. See the chart below for examples.

- 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, walk away, come back a few minutes later, and start again. If your dog refuses to obey the command, be patient and remember that eventually he will have to obey your command to get what he wants.

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

- Most dogs assume a neutral or submissive role toward people, but some dogs will challenge their owners for dominance. Requiring a dominant dog to work for everything he wants is a safe, nonconfrontational way to establish control.

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YOU	YOUR DOG
Put your dog’s leash on to go for a walk	Must sit until you’ve put the leash on
Feed your dog	Must lie down and stay until you’ve put the bowl down
Play a game of fetch after work	Must sit and “shake hands” each time you throw the toy
Rub your dog’s belly while watching TV	Must lie down and roll over before being petted

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When your pet is learning a new behavior, she should be rewarded every time she does the behavior, which means continuous reinforcement. It may be necessary to use a technique called "shaping" with your pet, which means reinforcing something close to the desired response and then gradually requiring more from your dog before she gets the treat. For example, if you're teaching your dog to "shake hands," you may initially reward her for lifting her paw off the ground, then for lifting it higher, then for touching your hand, then for letting you hold her paw, and finally, for actually "shaking hands" with you.

Intermittent reinforcement can be used once your pet has reliably learned the behavior. At first, reward her with the treat three out of every four times she does the behavior. Then, over time, reward her about half the time, then about a third of the time, and so on, until you're only rewarding her occasionally with the treat. Continue to praise her 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 she doesn't catch on that she only has to respond every other time. Your pet will soon learn that if she keeps responding, eventually she'll get what she wants—your praise and an occasional treat.

By understanding 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 she really does want to please you and knows that, occasionally, she'll get a treat, too. There are many small opportunities to reinforce her behavior. You may have her "sit" before letting her out the door (which helps prevent door-darting), before petting her (which helps prevent jumping up on people), or before feeding her. Give her a pat or a "Good dog" for lying quietly by your feet, or slip a treat into a Kong®-type toy when she's chewing it instead of your shoe.

The Pros and Cons of Punishment

Punishment can be verbal, postural, or physical, and it means giving your pet something unpleasant immediately after she does something you don't want her to do. The punishment makes it less likely that the behavior will occur again. To be

effective, punishment must be delivered while your pet is engaged in the undesirable behavior—in other words, "caught in the act." If the punishment is delivered too late, even seconds later, your pet will not associate the punishment with the undesired behavior.

Punishment delivered by you may erode your dog's trust. That's why punishment is most effective when it does not come directly from you. For example, after your dog acts in an undesirable way, use a shake can, an air horn, or keys—but don't draw attention to the fact that the noise comes from you. If your dog perceives her "environment," instead of you, to be delivering the punishment, she'll be more likely to avoid the behavior even when you're not around.

In addition, if you're too late in administering it, punishment will seem unpredictable to your dog. She's likely to become fearful, distrustful, or aggressive, which will only lead to more behavior problems. What we humans often interpret as "guilty" looks are actually submissive postures by our pets. Animals don't have a moral sense of right and wrong, but they are adept at associating your presence, and the presence of a mess, with punishment.

If you've tried punishment and it hasn't worked, you should stop using punishment and use only positive reinforcement. And never use physical punishment that involves some level of discomfort or pain, which may cause your pet to bite to defend herself. Holding the neck skin and shaking your dog or performing "alpha rolls" (forcing your dog onto her back and pinning her on the floor) are both likely to result in bites. And punishment might be associated with other stimuli, including people, that are present at the time the punishment occurs. For example, a pet who is punished for getting too close to a small child may become fearful of, or aggressive toward, that child—or toward other children. That's why physical punishment is not only bad for your pet, it's also bad for you and others.

Adapted from material originally developed by applied animal behaviorists at the Dumb Friends League, Denver, Colorado.
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