



Using Toys and Food to lure dogs.

In Agility, especially in a class situation, the introduction of the dogs to new obstacles is frequently done by use of a lure. ie. a toy or food is held in front of the dog to cause the dog to follow the toy/food/hand and perform the obstacle. This is a good way to introduce new obstacles, but the use of the toy and the food as a lure must be stopped very soon in the teaching process or the dog's performance comes to rely on the presence of the food or toy, ie. If the toy or food is not present then the behaviour declines or stops. The toy or food have become a bribe. If the bribe is not present the behaviour does not occur, or is of poor quality.

You want to use the lure of food, toy and even the hand in front of the nose for as short a time as possible, and replace them with a verbal or visual cue/command.

Food and Toys are rewards.

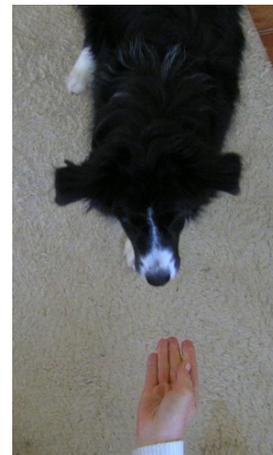
Food and toys should however, be used as rewards. Rewards appear once the behaviour has been performed to the required level. The behaviour should be marked by a clicker. Then the reward is given. The behaviour the handler requires changes as the dog learns the obstacle, with the expectations increasing as the dog shows it understands each level. In this way the dog is rewarded for increasingly good performances, and so overall its performance on that obstacle improves.



Do not always have the toy or food on your body. Break off an exercise and run to the edge of the training area and get out the food, or tug with the toy. This will make the food or toy even more rewarding!

When to use Food or toys.

Ideally I recommend using food for slow precise behaviours eg. beginnings of contact performance, and toys for faster behaviours requiring the dog to move away from the handler eg. distance jumping. Toys can also be introduced once the dog has learnt the basic skill, as a way of increasing the hype and therefore making the job slightly harder to perform.



How food and toy work.

The production of food causes the production of saliva and the initiation of parasympathetic nerve pathways. These initiate blood flow to the digestive organs, start digestion and other basic bodily activities, which are generally more stationary and low key.

Toys are used to simulate the chase which causes the production of adrenaline and the initiation of the sympathetic nerve pathways. This causes increased blood flow to the muscles and lungs and heart and dilation of pupils. Toys tend to excite dogs actively much more than food will do.

Food does not cause production of adrenaline (the flight, fright, fight hormone), that is produced in dogs by the promise of the chase, provided only by toys (or a rabbit!)

So next time you get out the food or the toy, ask yourself,

- Am I using this as a bribe? (If so, put it away)
- Am I using this to reward a good performance? (In this case... go for it!).



What if your dog does not like toys?

You can teach your dog to like toys. It takes a little bit of time but is well worth it. One way is to pick a toy that can be filled with food. The dog will, in all likelihood interact with the toy because it contains food. If the dog sniffs it then click and open the toy to give the dog a

piece of food. As the dog becomes more interested you raise your standards, asking for far greater interactions, such as using the teeth, picking it up, shaking it or trying to open it up, tugging with it etc.

A second way is use the "jealous factor". Get yourself a nice toy and put it in a drawer. Every day, multi times a day get it out of the drawer, act thrilled that it is there and play with it yourself, toss it up in the air etc. Then put it away. After a few days you should find your dog is interested. Show him the toy but don't let him have it, play with it yourself

then put it away! Next time let him sniff it, maybe mouth it, and as time goes on you can "share" it with your dog. After a while you should have a dog that wants your toy!

Once you have a dog happy to play with one toy then introduce others, he should love to play with you whatever you offer!

