

Positive Reinforcement

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This is the sixth article of the series by the Educational Committee. The series continues to be available in the library on the Members Only part of the website.



Learning and Rewards

The best way to train your Stabyhoun is through proper use of positive reinforcement. The goal of training is for your Staby to "learn" the proper behavior. The training sequence is to give a cue, get the response and then reinforce the behavior.



How does learning take place?

Learning occurs by establishing a connection between a behavior and consequence. The connection between behavior and consequence can be positive or negative. When there is a positive connection between the behavior and consequence, the MORE your Stabyhoun will perform that behavior. However, if there is a negative consequence for a behavior the LESS your Staby will perform it.



What is Positive Reinforcement?

Positive reinforcement is anything that INCREASES the likelihood that a behavior will be repeated. There is a "positive" relationship between the behavior and consequence. The more your Staby does a behavior you like, more good things is what it gets...this makes the behavior INCREASE.



What kinds of things will a Stabyhoun consider positive?

The key is to select the reward that motivates your dog. For example:

a play session • a fun toy • a walk • a pat on the head • praise • hug • food

Save rewards for training because they become more motivating and your dog will learn quickly what behavior leads to that reward. Anytime you give your dog something of value from a walk to food, make him EARN each reward. For example, you are taking the dog for a walk, have him sit to put on his leash. You are giving him a tasty bone; have him do a down to EARN the bone.



How do I use Positive Reinforcement?

Using positive reinforcement is more than just giving a pat on the head or giving a treat. Timing of the reward is VERY important. Remember, your Staby is behaving all the time. So, you need to be aware that you're reinforcing the behavior you want and not some other behavior. One example is SIT. You ask your Staby to sit, while you're saying "good Staby", the dog stands up and you give the treat. What just happened? You have rewarded "standing up" not the "sit". Another example is house-training. Your Staby "goes potty" outside, you call the dog back inside and give a treat. What happened this time? You just rewarded your Staby for coming into the house not going potty outside.



Should I reward my Stabyhoun every time?

How often you reinforce is important. The rate at which behavior is reinforced is called a SCHEDULE. Here are several schedules of reinforcement.

Continuous reinforcement: Every time your Staby performs a behavior it is reinforced with a reward. While this may sound like a good idea, it is actually less ideal because once you stop rewarding every single time, the behavior will often stop.

Variable rate of reinforcement: Reinforcement does NOT come after each behavior but intermittently. This means that instead of a reward every time, the dog gets a reward every third time, then maybe two in a row, then maybe not until the dog has done the same behavior five more times. What happens when you reward this way? Behavior tends to be stronger and last longer.

NOTE: Start training NEW cues or behaviors with continuous reinforcement but switch to intermittent, variable rates as



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soon as your Staby is responding consistently.



Is there a wrong way to reward my Staby?

Yes, we may reinforce behaviors we DON'T want. Remember positive reinforcement makes behavior INCREASE. So, there may be behaviors you're inadvertently reinforcing when your Staby is exhibiting behavior you don't like. For instance giving attention of any form to a dog that is barking, jumping, or scratching at the door only serves to reward that behavior. Some people give bits of food, pat the dog or play with it in an attempt to calm it down. What you are really reinforcing is the behavior you don't like. Examples include using a harsh tone of voice, pushing your dog away when it jumps up. You may think you are punishing these behaviors when in fact you are rewarding the dog by giving it what it wants...attention!



What is Clicker Training?

A clicker is an audible tone which is paired with a food reward. By consistently giving a "click" just prior to giving the food it becomes what is called a "conditioned stimulus". The value of a clicker is that it can then be used as a reward to tell the dog "yes, that's what I'm looking for" and followed by a treat. Plus, it's a clear and concise way to communicate to the dog that they have or have not done the behavior you were looking for.



Remember: a reward should never be given unless it's earned.