Chaining Behaviours

Chaining behaviours is a technique for fading reinforcement. To some extent we will continue to reinforce our dog's behaviour with food through-out their life BUT this doesn't mean that we will continue to reinforce every behaviour every time.

Students considering competition often wonder how they are going to go from training with food to performing in the ring where food is not allowed.

During the process of teaching our dog a new behaviour we have been marking and reinforcing each time we asked him to perform the behaviour. Once your dog is solid on a behaviour (meaning that the dog will do the behaviour on cue, without a food lure, in a couple of locations and with some level of distraction present) you can start to fade food rewards.

We are never going to fade reinforcement entirely because behaviour that is not reinforced will eventually disappear. But we are going to introduce some randomness into when the dog gets a reward. The goal here is that the dog believes that a reward is always possible.

Tip: Hide a few caches of treats around your house so that you can ask for a behaviour and be able to mark and reinforce it. This will help reinforce the lottery effect of an unexpected treat jackpot and reinforce the idea that there could potentially be a reward after any behaviour.

Tip: It is important that the dog not get used to either seeing the food or you fumbling at your pocket before you cue a behaviour (we don't want him to know before he performs the behaviour whether or not there is a treat at the end).

Chaining Behaviours

Chaining behaviours is the first steps of fading reinforcement. Basically we are going to ask for a behaviour your dog is solid on and then a second behaviour and we will only mark and reinforce the second behaviour. For example, we ask the dog to sit and then spin and we mark and reinforce after the dog performs the spin.

We will work toward increasing the number of behaviours before reinforcing but there should always be an element of randomness. Sometimes ask for 3 behaviours or 5 or 9 and sometimes reward several times in a row.

Dog competing in obedience competition may perform upwards of 40 behaviours before leaving the ring – all without a food reward.

Using a Keep Going Signal

In our positive training system when we mark with a marker word "yes" for example or a click we ALWAYS follow that with a food reward. When we want to let the dog know that he is still doing the right thing but we don't intend to reward with food we use a keep-going signal such as "nice" or "good".

Just as we introduce randomness with our reinforcement we also want there to be some randomness when incorporating the keep going signal. You don't have to use it every time the dog does a behaviour sometimes just say silent. The goal of using the keep-going signal is to reassure the dog that he is doing the right thing – we don't want to use the words so often they become background music for the dog. You will be able to fade your keep-going signal to fewer times as the dog becomes more confident on the behaviours asked.

Reading Your Dog

The amount of reinforcement will vary between dogs and dogs will require more reinforcement on behaviours they are learning or behaviours they are not yet confident on. They will also need more frequent reinforcement when training in a new location or have new distractions.

Gauge your dog's engagement level: if it starts dropping then reward more / use the keep going signal more often, if his engagement stays strong you can increase the number of behaviours before marking and reinforcing.