

Chapter 4 Click! Speed and Motivation

Motivation is at the heart of your training. No matter how fast and motivated your dog is, consistency, confidence, attitude and ultimately, speed must be focused on in every training session. When it comes to motivation, some things are known scientifically, but finding how to motivate each individual dog is an art.

By experimenting with various games, the secret of motivating each dog can be found. If one game does not work, try another. If that one fails, try yet another. Systematically trying different games will ultimately lead to success.

Patience and persistence are necessary because each dog is different. My min pin Turbo loves to play tug with hair scrunchies. Had I not persistently tried different “toys,” I would never have learned about this obsession! My Jack Russell Terrier, Junior, used to go crazy for wind up cars. Who would have guessed? They are an easy toy to hide, and pull out of a pocket to play.

Observing your dog play with other dogs or with an object can also give you motivational ideas. My Border Collie, Nicki, loves to grab a toy by its end and swing it in a circle around herself. I have no idea how she does this without getting dizzy, but she loves it! After discovering this I promptly put the toy spinning on cue and now use it as reinforcement.

Playing games builds motivation to be with you because through classical conditioning, the act of playing becomes associated with you. Classical conditioning is the process by which one stimulus becomes linked with and predicts the arrival of another stimulus. If you (stimulus one) play fun games (stimulus two) with your dog, then via classical

conditioning being with you becomes fun. Classical conditioning works the opposite way too. If you yell at your dog, or do anything the dog dislikes, you become unfun. Motivation is playing with a dog that wants to spend time with you, and considers you safe and fun.

What is Agility Motivation?

Motivation is the reason your dog takes action. In agility, we want her to take fast and accurate action. We want our dogs to act because of the strong history of reinforcement for the game of agility itself. This means that running agility with you becomes more fun than food or any toy. Agility with you has become a game.

What Affects Your Dog's Motivation?

According to animal behaviorist and agility competitor Pamela Reid, three things affect motivation:

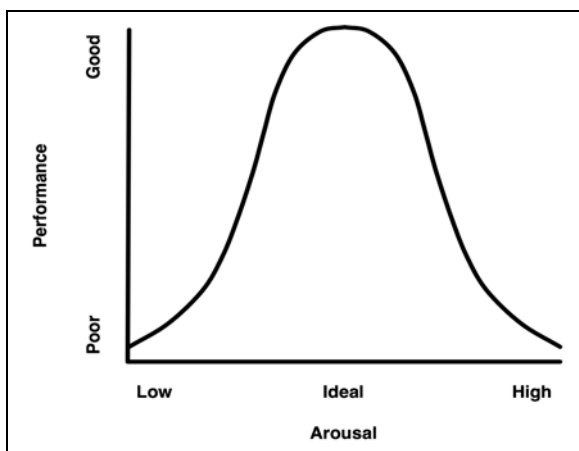
- Emotionality.
- Need.
- Perceived value of the reinforcement.

Emotionality

Emotionality refers to a dog's level of reactivity or arousal. For agility, many competitors desire a more reactive, more easily aroused dog, commonly referred to as "high drive." The opposite of reactive is laid back and calm, less easily aroused. More arousal usually means faster at doing agility behaviors, while less arousal usually means slower.

A dog that is in the acquisition stage of learning requires a lower arousal state in order to concentrate and absorb what is being taught. Ultimately, the dog must be able to perform the agility behaviors even when highly aroused. If the dog is not aroused enough, she will not be motivated to give you her best performance. If she is too aroused, she will have trouble thinking and performing the cued behaviors fluently.

Arousal is a double-edged sword. Too much of it, and a dog can lose her ability to focus or think. The Yerkes–Dodson Law demonstrates that an animal needs to be in an ideal arousal state in order to learn. This ideal arousal state is a happy medium between low arousal (dog may not be motivated to learn) and high arousal (dog may be too excited to learn). The Yerkes-Dodson law states that the fastest learning is possible with a medium level of arousal.



If your dog is very calm her arousal may be too low to learn. If her arousal is too high her learning may be slowed or stopped.

Understand your dog's arousal baseline. Do you need to decrease your dog's arousal or increase her arousal for optimum performance? If your dog is easily aroused, how can you calm her so that she can go into the ring able to think? If your dog has a tendency toward low arousal, what can you do to conserve her energy and pump her up right before you compete?

If your dog is very reactive and easily aroused, self-control exercises such as sit or down-stay may be helpful. My Border Collie, Stevie, got so excited when I first began

trailing him in agility that he would forget how to weave. I had failed to prepare him for the very high arousal state he would reach in the competition ring. Because of state dependent learning, he did not know how to weave when that aroused. When this would happen, I would calmly ask him to lie down, after one to two seconds release him and again cue him to weave. The brief lie down enabled him to settle enough so that he “remembered” how to weave. Part of the art of training is to try to anticipate the arousal state your dog will be in when competing and then duplicate that arousal state in training. Over time, Stevie gradually habituated to (got used to) the agility trial environment. When training, I added more games that raised his arousal. Eventually he habituated to his high level of arousal and his competition weaving became reliable.

Need

The need for food, exercise, elimination, etc. creates motivation. Need is also a double-edged sword. A dog that is too hungry will be unable to learn. A dog that is not hungry will not be motivated by food. Tune into your dog and find the ideal level of need.

A dog that is under-exercised because of excessive crating may also be unable to learn. This dog’s need to run may be so high that nothing else will be processed by the dog’s brain. While interviewing Attila Skukalek, a world-class musical freestyle (dog dancing) competitor, he explained that he has to run his Border Collie Fly for two miles before daily training sessions, otherwise Fly is unable to focus on her work. If Skukalek did not meet Fly’s need for exercise prior to training, their training sessions would be more frustrating and less effective and they wouldn’t be the great team that they are!

Understanding how your dog’s needs work for you, or against you, is a critical part of solving the mystery of motivating your dog.

Dopamine

Another factor that is likely to influence your dog's motivation is dopamine. Dopamine is a neurotransmitter, a biochemical signal that is associated with pleasure, reinforcement and motivation. In humans, low dopamine is linked with depression and other mental illness. In order for dopamine to be processed humans need minerals and vitamins, including B6, B12, C, Folic Acid, Magnesium, Manganese, Iron, Copper and Zinc. The canine brain responds similarly to the human brain in terms of drugs that target neurotransmitters, so theoretically it could be that low motivation dogs may actually have a problem processing dopamine.

Hormones

Hormones can affect behavior and motivation. Dogs that tend to stress may have higher than normal levels of the hormone cortisol. Cortisol is produced by the adrenal glands. In general, if one hormone is out of balance, it can cause all the other hormones to become unbalanced. The result can be a dog that is resistant to learning via operant and classical conditioning.

Fast-Twitch Muscle Tissue

Muscle tissue can be grouped into slow-twitch and fast-twitch. Slow-twitch is useful for physical activities that require endurance, such as marathons. Fast-twitch muscle is ideal for sprinting and other fast-paced activities. Ideally, we want the muscles of our agility dogs to be primarily fast-twitch.

Olympic sprinters have been shown to have as much as 80% fast-twitch muscle tissue. The question is, are these individuals genetically blessed or did hard work create that high percentage of fast-twitch muscles? Researchers have demonstrated fast-twitch to slow-twitch fiber transformation in animal skeletal muscle. The answer is probably a mix of genetics and training.

Dogs that seem incapable of moving slowly may be genetically predisposed to more fast-twitch muscle tissue, thus creating an ideal agility dog, one that does everything very fast and asks questions later.

Nutrition

A large dog food company did a study on dog development and found that dogs supplied with certain nutrients that boost brain development ended up “smarter” than the control group of dogs. This means that a dog starved or fed an improper diet as a puppy may have a different learning style and process information differently. A brain that is not functioning at optimal levels is certainly going to impact a dog’s motivation.

Some poorly trained dogs run very fast agility, simply because they default to doing everything fast. Some well-trained dogs run slow agility for a variety of reasons — known and unknown — not all of which include the training or handling of the dog. If you have a motivational issue, it is logical to evaluate your training and handling practices, but there are dogs that have motivational challenges despite good training and handling.

Deprivation

It’s the double-edged sword thing again. Deprivation is the withholding of food or other reinforcer to obtain an increase in the dog’s motivation to perform behaviors (Pamela Reid). However, extreme deprivation interferes with the dog’s ability to think and learn.

The excessively food deprived dog becomes so desperate for food that she is unable to focus on anything else. A very high drive dog that has been crated for hours may be unable to perform even simple cues because of her over-the-top needs for exercise and/or social contact. Balance is key. Some deprivation is okay, too much is not. Extreme deprivation is force. Skip extreme deprivation, **click and play** agility instead.

Thinking about deprivation with the dog's happiness in mind, using mild deprivation is ethically acceptable. Mild deprivation is not feeding a dog before you train her. Using a closed economy, where the dog works for every piece of food, is also a form of mild deprivation. To use a closed economy, put your dog's daily food ration in a container and use the food to play training games. Most dogs love the closed economy system, it is much more interesting than just eating out of a bowl. Briefly crating a dog for 30 minutes before you work her, if you usually spend time with your dog before training, may motivate your dog to be more interested in playing with you. If you have a lower energy dog, she may be refreshed from napping in her crate.

If you used mild deprivation and have not been successful, it is time to rethink your overall training program, rather than increase deprivation. Anything more than mild deprivation could end up being a losing situation for the dog, and for the trainer too. Go for win/win training!

Cost and Benefits of Crating

Some people in the United States use long hours of crating to control the dog's environment and build motivation. While this method may be successful for some dogs, it may not be necessary. In England and Europe, most dogs are never crated. Not even as puppies. They use laundry rooms or bathrooms to housetrain pups. Mary Ray, a world famous musical freestyle, obedience and agility trainer, says that some people in England use excessive crating in an attempt to increase motivation and drive for work. However, according to Ray these dogs don't win any more than the dogs that are loose in the house. Perhaps excessive crating is a superstitious behavior. Some people do it and they are very successful. People mistakenly attribute that success to the excessive crating and so the idea is perpetuated. Dogs that love to play

agility seem to want to play regardless of whether they are crated or not.



Photo by Andrea Davis

One potential problem with crating is that some dogs bite at the crate, damaging their teeth. My Moose, in the early stages of doggie Alzheimers, pulverized all of his incisors by biting at his crate door. Surgery was required to remove the roots of the teeth. Dogs with separation anxiety also may bite the bars of crates.

Many dogs' lives have been saved by the proper use of crating, however before you crate your dog, ask yourself what your motivation is for doing so.

In the "*Handbook of Applied Dog Behavior and Training*," Steven Lindsay cites several studies and explains that excessive crating is known to cause developmental problems because of social and sensory deprivation. Excessive crating during critical periods of development can prevent a dog from developing the proper muscles and/or coordination. Lindsay says that crating may cause neurotic behaviors, such as pacing and circling. In addition, crating for more than 10-18 hours a day may result in crate dependency causing dogs to be unable to cope with life outside a crate because of cognitive and perceptual overload. Lindsay particularly warns against excessive crating of active, young and curious dogs.

Perceived Value of Reinforcement

Perceived value of reinforcement is the second dynamic mentioned by Pam Reid in terms of motivation. The value of reinforcement is determined by the dog. What is fun to

your dog? To clicker train your dog, you need to know what your dog enjoys. The more games you have, the more fun training can be for your dog, because you can vary what fun things happen after the click. So don't just stop after you have found five things your dog likes. Keep going and adding to your list.

Begin exploring what your dog finds fun by using the categories of interactive games, sounds, taste and touch as a guide. Become a fun detective. The investigation begins now! Spend the next few days playing with your dog, opening the fridge and testing out which foods your dog likes, and petting your dog in different ways as you watch her facial expression and body language. Create a list of reinforcers that you can use to teach your dog.

Once you have listed all the things your dog likes, rate them on a scale of one to ten. A level one positive reinforcer is something that your dog likes, but has very low potential for training. A level ten positive reinforcer blows your dog's mind. When training agility use reinforcers that are rated seven or higher. These become sacred reinforcers and are saved for training with you only.



When Arnie really likes a treat, the whites in the corners of his eyes show while he reaches for it with his mouth. We call these treats “eye-popping good.”

Photo by Angelica Steinker

During training, be variable and sometimes give your dog a level 10 reinforcer and another time a level seven. By mixing it up, you are turning the process of learning into a fun, unpredictable game. Unpredictability of reinforcers

helps make training exciting. Consider the following categories of positive reinforcers to help you create a list of what your dog likes!

Interactive Games

“Interactive” refers to games such as tugging, which requires both you and your dog to play.

Sounds

What sounds does your dog like? For many dogs the sound of praise is highly reinforcing, while others may go nuts over the squeak of a toy. What did your fun detective work uncover regarding sounds? This category will have some conditioned reinforcers in it. The clank of the cookie jar, the jingle of car keys and, of course, the click are all sounds linked with reinforcement. The sound predicts the activity, via classical conditioning. However, if the sound is not consistently paired with the reinforcing activity, then the clank, jingle or even the click will lose its power. The sound has power only because of what happens after the sound.

Taste

Taste is undoubtedly one of the most popular categories. Most dogs thoroughly enjoy food and left to their own devices would eat until they burst.

List any foods your dog craves. Experiment to find at least a handful of “taste” reinforcers that your dog finds eye-popping good. Again, the idea is to have a long list of reinforcers so you can have fun surprising your dog with lots of different reinforcers. If your dog does not like food, focus on the other categories and develop those. Some dogs go through developmental stages where they don’t like food, usually this passes by two or three years of age. Develop other reinforcers during this time.

Touch

Observe your dog. List the type of physical touch and the location of the touch that your dog likes. Some dogs don't like to be touched. You may be able to teach your dog to like touch by pairing touch with food or another reinforcer. If you become a canine massage expert and observe what your dog likes she may eventually love to be touched. Observe your dog's response to physical touch beginning with light feather type touching. Watch your dog's face and body and look for visible signs of relaxation. Deep sighs or moans can be a big hint that you are on the right track.

Observe how slow, soft strokes help your dog relax and how fast, quick rubdowns can energize your dog. Let your dog tell you what she likes. If the dog appears neutral, try giving the technique a few more times. Some dogs take time making up their minds.

Canine massage is an excellent way to warm your dog up before exercising or a great way to help her cool down. It is also a wonderful way to build your reinforcement history with your dog. Once you know how your dog likes to be touched, you have two permanent reinforcers, your right and left hands. They will be with you no matter where you go.

In agility, verbal and touch praise can be underused because it is so easy to use food. It can be dangerous to rely on food as the only motivator. The dog may become overly focused on food and using only one reinforcer is not helping your dog generalize her training to different contexts. Praise and play can last for as long as you want and the dog never fills up. Reinforcing for a longer time may cause your dog to be more motivated to play with you.

Pairing

Potential reinforcers, such as physical touch or praise, can be paired with food. A dog that does not know how to enjoy physical touch can be clicked and reinforced with

food for allowing light petting and eventually for stroking. If you continue this process over several sessions, the dog may gradually begin to associate the touch with food and the touch may take on reinforcing properties. Some dogs dislike being touched and some of those dogs may never learn to enjoy petting, but they can learn to be *accepting* of physical touch. Like caviar can be an acquired taste, some dogs can learn to enjoy new forms of reinforcement, whereas others will never understand what the fuss is all about.



Hewy enjoying some long slow stroking from Suzanne.

Photo by Angelica Steinker

Regardless of which category your dog finds most reinforcing, never give up on getting a positive reinforcer to work until you have tried it extensively, this means months, not just a few times. Being as persistent as a terrier is what can pay off big. Frequently, dogs that did not seem interested in playing tug can develop a strong desire to play the game. Persist.

The most important category of reinforcers is interactive games. These are the most powerful. They are a great way to create a solid reinforcement history.

Satiation

If your dog has eaten prior to training, the value of food as a reinforcer may be reduced. Likewise, if your dog has just spent hours playing with other dogs, playing with you may not be very motivating. In both cases, the dogs are satiated. The dog's need for food or play have been met, so using them for motivation is likely to be unsuccessful.

Misconceptions

“Not smart enough” or “too stubborn to learn” are labels. These labels and others lock the dog into being something unchangeable. While labels can’t be avoided, they can rob the trainer of the mental framework and ability to make change. The dog has been pigeonholed. The truth is that a dog that appears to lack intelligence or appears stubborn may really lack motivation. Lacking motivation is a training issue that can usually be modified.

Tips for Motivating

Solving the puzzle of how to motivate a dog is a fun challenge. When trying to increase your dog’s motivation and speed, here are some tips to keep in mind.

Spend time every day playing with your dog. If you don’t do anything else that day, play with your dog. Play will help you build a fantastic reinforcement history. Focus on your click and play pyramid.

Use a variety of reinforcers: Food, toys, praise, rubs. If your dog likes it, use it! Make it a rule to change something about how you reinforce your dog every day. Experiment so you can continue to find new games to play with your dog.

Loving What Is

Whatever your dog’s genetic predisposition, accept it and love it. It is part of who they are. Don’t argue with reality, this will only cause you pain and needless suffering. Reality will never change. Acceptance and loving is so much easier and enables you to focus on what you can control and change. Chris Bach says every dog is “perfect,” perfect at being who she is. Expecting your Bassett to behave like a Border Collie sets both you and the dog up to fail, instead love what is.

Exploring Motivational Challenges

Motivational training is the art of reading the dog's motivation and adjusting yourself accordingly. We are the trainers, we adjust. When we adjust, the dog will alter her behavior. By continuously adjusting we can tune into what it is the dog needs to give us her best.

Happiness creates speed. Consistent, enjoyable training with an interesting variety of reinforcers can help create a dog with a happy attitude who enjoys playing the game of agility with you. Motivational training is about creating such great attitude that your dog would rather play with you and respond to your cues than anything else in her environment. Much easier said than done! After all, you are competing with fascinating smells in the grass, darting squirrels in the trees and other dogs. It takes a lot of money in the reinforcement history bank account to be more fun than a squirrel! But it can be done.

Just as important as understanding what your dog enjoys is realizing what she does not enjoy. Below are some reasons dogs may lack motivation.

Injury

If a dog is hurting, agility is not a reinforcing experience and performance will become associated with pain. Many training challenges have been caused by undiagnosed soft tissue injuries, hip dysplasia, elbow, knee or spine problems. If your dog suddenly loses her desire to play agility, have her examined by a veterinarian who is experienced with performance dogs and their physical issues.

Full-Out Running

Someone once asked me, "How do you get your dogs to run so fast?" In addition to clicker training and game playing, the answer is full-out running. Every day my dogs spend some time running as fast as they physically can. This ritual began with my Jack Russells because it was

either that or I'd go insane. High drive dogs benefit psychologically and physically from full-out running.

I recall my Jack Russells getting the zoomies (butt tucking bursts of speed) in the house while I stood outside talking on the phone. The first few seconds I was entertained by their "Indi 500" imitation, but before I recognized the danger, it was too late. Moose under-steered, swung wide and the burglar bar bounced off his leg and landed in the position that secured the house. With a resounding 'clunk' I had been locked out. Moose and Junior were just warming up. Face pressed against the sliding glass door and in my pajamas, I watched as their laps expanded. Now the laps included the bed. Pillows and covers were flying. My objecting bangs against the glass door cheered them on. (This was when I learned that some dogs are reinforced by attention including hysterical banging.) It began to rain. I gave up panicking and went to the neighbors. When I got back into the house, I found two terriers asleep on my bed as if tossed there by hurricane force winds. Surrounding them were the remnants of my pillows, blankets and sheets. Apparently, the Indi 500 had morphed into outright vandalism.

I had hit rock bottom. I needed help! I began exercising my dogs on a daily basis focusing on full-out running. It worked. My dogs have never locked me out of my house or shredded my bed again. It was "one trial learning" for me. By keeping them exercised, most of my dogs' behavior problems decreased or disappeared.

Fitness

Exercising ensures that your dog's muscles are strong and flexible so she can work at her highest potential, and reduce risk of injury. Agility is a physically demanding sport that requires running, biking or swimming with your dog to keep her fit. Canine massage, acupuncture, chiropractic care and physical therapy are also helpful in maintaining fitness. Certified canine massage therapist

Brandy Oliver, M.A. says, “Massage at any time, but particularly on a regular basis, can improve canine posture, flexibility, coat and even a dog’s concentration. Concentration improves when pain or discomfort is reduced or eliminated by the release of endorphins.” Being in touch with your dog’s body and knowing how her muscles usually feel is important. My husband checks our dogs’ backs for spasms every night. If he finds some, we massage the area until it’s gone.

Fitness includes keeping your dog’s weight at an ideal level. For a small agility dog, only one pound of extra weight can put a significant amount of strain on the joints. You must be able to feel the ribs and the tip of the pelvis bone on your dog’s rump. An overweight dog is more at risk for injuries and is less likely to be motivated.

Structure

Structural flaws — straight angulation of the front shoulder assembly or rear hip, knee, hock joints, or others — hamper a dog’s ability to jump and perform agility obstacles and can lead to injuries. Angulation refers to the degree of angle — viewing the dog from the side — of the front and rear legs. The shoulder assembly is from the tip of shoulder, to point of shoulder, to elbow. Generally, more of an angle is considered healthier than less of an angle. More of an angle allows for more shock absorption. Ideally, the front and rear leg angulation is balanced, meaning that both the front and the rear have similar degrees of angulation.

The ideal structure for an agility dog includes good length of neck so the dog can balance herself while jumping. The length of a dog’s back should be slightly longer than the length of her leg, good shoulder lay back and a good rear. Ideally, front and rear angles are balanced.



Photo by Suzanne Rider

The dog pictured here has both good shoulder and rear angulation, which means he is balanced. Because of his good structure and fitness, this dog rarely has tight muscles or spasms.

According to Dr. Christine Zink, D.V.M., Ph.D., author of *Peak Performance: Coaching the Canine Athlete*, good structure is critical for the health of an agility dog. To evaluate structure you need to be familiar with canine anatomy. Determine rear angulation by locating the hip, knee and hock joints and visually assessing the angle that those three joints create.



This dog's front legs come straight down from his elbows to his toes.

Photo by Suzanne Rider

Zink prefers slightly east-west (toes turning slightly outward) for an agility dog. Zink says that slightly outward turned toes increase the dog's stability and the ability to turn quickly.



This dog's rear is straight from the hock to the toes. Dr. Chris Zink prefers a slightly cow hocked structure (hocks slightly turned in) for tighter turning in agility.

Photo by Suzanne Rider

Good structure is most apparent in the dog's movement. A well-structured dog at the trot will glide above the ground and appear to move effortlessly. The movement will be smooth with no jarring motions. A poorly structured dog moves in short choppy strides that compensate for the structural flaws. Rachel Page Elliot has written a great book on structure entitled "*Dog Steps*."

Dog Training the Trainer

Clicker trainer Steve White says, "Someone is always training, it is either you or the dog." My own education in "being trained" was conducted by one of my Jack Russell Terriers. My training sessions used to go something like this: Angelica asks Jack Russell to run a segment including the weave poles. Jack Russell performs everything flawlessly, but when he gets to the poles, he only hits the entrance and then pops out. Angelica thinks she is being a good clicker trainer, and goes back to work the weaves clicking for the third pole, since that is where the dog popped previously. Blissfully ignorant, I would assume that the problem was now "fixed." Next time I asked him to weave, he again popped out after the entrance. Our sessions would continue with these kinds of training issues for months, because my dog was smarter than I was! What my Jack Russell had learned was that my rate of reinforcement would drop when we went from acquisition to maintenance. He knew he had a better chance of getting more reinforcements if he messed up than if he performed flawlessly. I had accidentally trained him to make mistakes in order to prompt me to raise his rate of reinforcement. Is that dog smart? Or I am just trying to feel better about the whole incident? Don't allow yourself to be "Jack Russelled." Be unpredictable and keep the dog guessing when she might get the next click and reinforcement.

Some dogs love to be trained and other dogs love to train. Dogs that love to be trained may be easier to teach agility

behaviors to than dogs that are motivated to train you. But you do learn more working with the challenging ones.

Lure Training

Luring is the process of using a food or toy reinforcer to prompt the dog into performing a desired behavior. While lure training can yield fast results, it can create a motivational problem. Every dog is different, so some dogs may do extremely well with lure training. Using badly executed lure training may cause some dogs to perform only if food is present. Luring has created an assumption, rather than the hope of reinforcement. If you have problems fading a food lure, avoid using it. Use an object as a target to prompt, shape or capture instead.

Throw away your bait bag! It is one giant cue that the bar is open for business. It is also one giant cue that no food will be available if you are not wearing it. If you own a dog with a motivational issue, your bait bag is a signal to your dog that the bar is open and you are available to be trained.

Take away the visual cue of having food available by hiding food treats. (Use plastic containers to store food treats in various places around your home, training field, and training center.) If the problem is a toy dependency – support groups are available – you can do the same thing hiding many toys in various locations. Make it unpredictable to the dog where the toy may come from or at what point the click and the toy will come.

Shaping Challenges

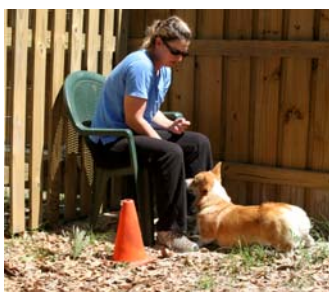
Shaping is one of the best ways to create behaviors, yet it is probably the least understood of all training methods. Training and motivation are linked. Ideal training supports motivation, while less than ideal training can kill motivation.

If shaping is poorly done, it may cause the dog to lose motivation. Using a low rate of reinforcement during

acquisition or using confusing training methods can also cause a dog to lose motivation.

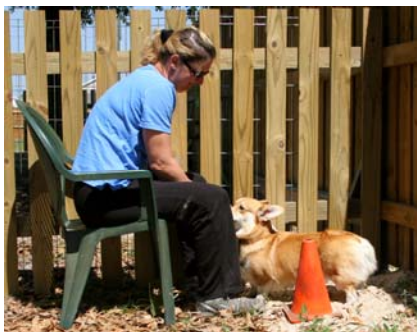
When training, evaluate what behavior you will be working on, what learning game would likely be most effective and consider what approximations you are going to use.

Kay Laurence explains in her *“Clicker Training Intermediate”* book that for some behaviors you can anticipate that free shaping without any guidance from the trainer will create a high level of frustration for the dog. If you want to teach your dog to walk backwards around a cone, you can free shape this with no guidance and probably create a bunch of confusion for the dog, or you can use Laurence’s guided shaping idea pictured below to help set the dog up for success.



To set the dog up for success backchain the entire exercise by beginning with only the last step of the backward circle around the cone, pictured at left. Xtra is set up for success because I am blocking the exit with my chair. It is easy for her to back up next to the cone.

Photos by Suzanne Rider



At left, Xtra is backing a quarter turn around the cone. By using backchaining she is able to confidently move backwards around the cone.

Ultimately, the quarter turn is put on cue and the dog can be cued several times to accomplish a full turn.

As an experiment, I used one of the above methods on each of my dogs. Nicki was free shaped to go backwards around a cone with no barrier help. Zoomie was shaped using the guided “set up for success” method. Both dogs had been taught in a previous session that targeting the cone was not going to get clicks and reinforcements. Both dogs backed up on cue.

After one 3-minute session with each dog, Nicki was nose targeting the cone again, despite my not clicking it. And was so frustrated, she actually threw the cone at me. Nicki’s rate of reinforcement was too low which caused her to frantically random sample, offering behaviors and dirty looks and lots of barking. The problem was that I was unable to get the criteria I was setting. I wanted her to back near the cone but since there were no barriers she backed into it instead. Once she felt the cone with her rear legs she became convinced that she needed to target the cone again and grabbed it with her mouth.

Meanwhile, during his 3-minute session, Zoomie, the dog set up for success with the ring gating, was confidently taking two steps backward around the cone. Using the barriers, I was able to shape Zoomie to walk around the cone forward into the barrier channel. By blocking the exit (see photo) he was prompted to lean back. I clicked and reinforced that, then got stepping back and finally several steps walking backwards around the cone. Lures, ring gating, targets and so on help dogs get it right and that is always good, but dependency issues must be understood and fading needs to be part of the training process.

Freeshaping is ideal for behaviors that you are certain you will be able to attain in seconds. Teaching a dog to nose or paw a target with freeshaping is likely to be successful.

The goal behavior and the dog that you are attempting to train, determine the method of training you choose.

Here are some potential challenges that you may face while shaping.

Dog learns to wait for help. The dog is offering very little behavior so the trainer starts helping (and helping and helping). This one is easy to fix, just stop helping and wait. Pretend you have all the time in the world, look for the tiniest movement or shift of movement in the right direction, click and reinforce.

Being uncertain of criteria and missing opportunities to click and reinforce so that your rate of reinforcement drops too low. Close your eyes and visualize your dog doing the end behavior you are training, visualize the dog doing only very tiny parts of the behavior. What does it look like? Use visualization to create a training plan that includes tiny approximations.

Lowering criteria and getting stuck. No big deal, just end the session and try again in a few minutes.

Clicking a behavior more than once so that the dog thinks an approximation is actually an end behavior. End the session, give the dog a handful of cookies for playing and try again later.

Dog can't commit to a single behavior because she is trained to random sample. This can be the result of failing to provide a framework for shaping. Kay Laurence recommends always sitting in a chair to signal your dog that a shaping session is about to begin. Continue sitting in the chair in different environments until the behavior is on cue and begin generalizing the cue to different body positions. Another cause for off cue random sampling can be the result of playing a lot of the "be creative game," you may have taught your dog to default to random sampling.

All of these training issues can affect your dog's motivation and your own motivation. Have a clear plan for how you will teach your dog what you want her to learn. If you don't have a plan, find a clicker instructor who will help you develop one. Ideal training is motivating to the dog!

Lumping

Lumping refers to the training error of teaching the dog more than one criterion at a time or skipping training steps. It may seem time saving, but in reality lumping damages the training process. Lumping can cause a dog to misunderstand what you are training and/or may undermine the dog's confidence, causing decreased motivation. Lumping can happen very easily, even with experienced trainers. It can be difficult to see how a behavior can be broken down further. As a result, the trainer unintentionally lumps. For example, in one session a trainer attempts to teach the dog to jump on the table, one behavior; to lie down on it, a second behavior; hold that position for five seconds (a duration of the second behavior) and release on the "okay" cue, a third behavior. When the dog is slow to perform, the trainer gets frustrated. This could have been avoided by teaching each of the behaviors separately.

1. Lie down quickly on the ground, away from the table is one game.
2. Jump up on the table.
3. Teach the duration of down, with proofing games.
4. Okay release game on flat.
5. Okay release game off table.
6. Train #1 on the table.
7. Train #3 on table.
8. Put all the behaviors on cue.
9. Stack cues and ask dog to perform behavior chain.

This list may seem tedious, but what's *really* tedious is fixing a table problem. It is much more fun and reinforcing to train properly to start with.

A great way to build your shaping skills is to play Kay Laurence's game Genabacab. In this fun game, one person is the dog, and the other person is the trainer. There is no talking while playing, so the game actually simulates the dog training process. (See the appendix for information on how to get the Genabacab game.)

Another way to avoid lumping is to perform the behavior as if you were the dog. This builds awareness of what you would need to do to get that behavior or behaviors. Kay Laurence suggested this to me and soon I was doing some rather strange things out on the agility field. While crawling across the A-frame I heard an ominous crack and briefly saw my life flash before my eyes. But physically performing the obstacles at a crawl was an insightful exercise. If you can physically do it, assume the position you are attempting to train with your dog. If you can't physically do it, do as much as you can, so you can get some idea of what the dog will be experiencing. Using visualization is helpful as an alternative to performing the physical behaviors.

Clicker trainer Bob Bailey teaches trainers how to split behaviors, the opposite of lumping, at his chicken clicker training camps. The idea is to learn from clicker training a chicken and apply the information to dog training. Chickens are challenging to train because they move very quickly so your timing has to be excellent. It is also rather challenging to deliver food to a chicken so again physical skills and timing can be honed. It was Bailey, along with Marion and Keller Breland, who developed the concept of splitting and lumping. (It doesn't matter what you call this process of using small approximations—Kay Laurence calls it microshaping—but it does matter that you do it.) The smaller the approximations the faster the learning will

progress and the more confident and motivated your dog will be.

It is never too late. If you lumped, you can go back and retrain with small approximations. You may find your dog running with increased speed and motivation as a result. Be sure to give the retrained behavior a new cue, as far as your dog is concerned, it will be a new behavior.

Jealousy is a Wonderful Thing

Describing a dog as being jealous is a humanization. It is not scientifically known whether dogs experience the emotion of jealousy. However, we can use frustration that looks like “jealousy” as a form of negative punishment. If you are training your dog and she is demonstrating a lack of motivation and you have access to a second dog, you can put her into a crate for some “rest” and allow her to watch you work another dog. After a few minutes, give her another chance to play with you. Usually dogs will exit the crate with more enthusiasm for the training game.

If you don't have a second dog, you can still crate your dog and pretend to play with your “invisible dog.” Use high pitched tones and playfully work the imaginary teammate. After a few minutes, give the real dog another chance. Or borrow a neighbor's dog. It doesn't matter if this dog doesn't know agility as long as he is willing to play with you or eat your treats.

Save Special Toys for Playtime

Be smart about your reinforcers. Manage them effectively, making them available only for play with you at training time. Then they will become precious to your dog and you can create more motivation for agility. It is important for dogs to have access to chew toys and other toys at all times. Access to toys keeps dogs mentally happy and balanced. If dogs don't have their own toys, it sets them up for playing with yours. Special toys, such as flying

discs, tug toys, etc., by contrast are put away and only available when playing training games.

Not Reinforcing Often Enough

The type and frequency of the reinforcement determine the success or failure of your training process. If your dog isn't excited by a dry piece of kibble, then it isn't a suitable reinforcer. The dog determines what is reinforcing, not the trainer. Sometimes, in the excitement of training, a trainer asks too much too soon. It becomes difficult for the dog to be right and the rate of reinforcement drops. Before we know it, our dogs begin losing interest.

The term rate of reinforcement is used to describe the number of times a dog is reinforced per behavior performed. A dog performing ten behaviors for one reinforcement is doing more work for less money (a lower rate of reinforcement). A dog performing ten behaviors for five reinforcers (higher rate of reinforcement) is getting a better paycheck. A dog learning a new behavior needs a high rate of reinforcement, every successful behavior should be clicked and reinforced. A dog that is performing known behaviors can usually handle more sporadic reinforcement (a lower rate of reinforcement). Learning is hard work and it should pay well so that your dog keeps playing the game with a happy attitude.

As trainers, we seem to think that once a behavior is learned it does not require reinforcement to be maintained. The truth is that most unreinforced behaviors will eventually disappear.

When your dog fails to perform a behavior and your rate of reinforcement is dropping too low, it is time to have your dog do a simple behavior like a hand touch, sit or down, and then reinforce. Kay Laurence calls this a "reset" and it is tremendously helpful in preventing loss of motivation. Returning to you and making eye contact after failing is also a wonderful skill that can be clicked and reinforced,

and used as a reset. Very soft dogs have to learn resilience, the reset cookie teaches this. Soft dogs can be so sensitive that missing a click and reinforcement is punishing to them, triggering loss of motivation.

Learned Helplessness

This occurs when a dog can't make sense of the physical corrections she is being given and she eventually "gives up." The dog's eyes may glaze over and/or the dog may curl up and roll into a ball. Some dogs in learned helplessness begin to show signs of stress if you do anything resembling "training." Training has become a cue that the dog will be hurt, rather than playing a game.

To reverse learned helplessness, capture the dog doing a simple behavior like a sit or down and click and reinforce. If the dog will not take food, try meat flavored baby food, peanut butter or something else highly enticing. If the dog refuses to eat from your hand, work on hand feeding when she is very hungry and slowly build up to longer periods of time of hand feeding. Gradually the dog will regain the ability to learn.

Learned helplessness causes a dog to shut down, but a dog may also shut down because of inconsistent training. If the dog can't make sense of the training process she may opt to leave the training area or may begin sniffing. Sniffing, yawning, sneezing and shaking, can all be signs of stress and may be indicating confusion. If a dog is consistently confused, that dog may develop avoidance behaviors that are similar to shutting down.

Reinforcing Too Much

Didn't I just spend the last few paragraphs repeatedly stating that lowering your rate of reinforcement can trash your dog's motivation? Now this heading reads, "Reinforcing Too Much?" No, it isn't a typo, it *is* possible to reinforce too much. Here's how: if for weeks or months you consistently click and treat for every behavior (one

behavior gets one click and reinforcement), you may discover behaviors that are not reinforced at this extremely high rate of reinforcement, will degrade or even disappear. The reason is that the dog is used to the 1:1 reinforcement ratio so if you don't click and reinforce she may stop performing that behavior because it no longer 'works.'

During acquisition, the rate of reinforcement is 1:1. However, as soon as you have the behavior on cue, switch to differential reinforcement of excellent behavior (DRE). This means that only excellent responses to cues are clicked and reinforced.

Fading the Click

A common motivational problem occurs when a dog, used to a high rate of reinforcement in training, gets no clicks or reinforcements while in the agility ring. This dog can then develop a context specific problem. "When I am at the training place, I run fast and have good attitude and I get reinforced. In the competition ring, I run slow and have a poopie attitude." For this dog, the agility competition ring signals no hope for reinforcement.

To avoid this, play the counting cues game. You know that your dog will be asked to perform roughly 20 to 40 behaviors while in the agility ring, so while you are training, count the cues your dog is performing. When you've reached a certain number *and* your dog is performing desired behaviors, click and reinforce.

A training session might look like this:

Number of cues	Number of clicks and reinforcements
13	1
18	1
7	1
41	1
17	1
1	1
43	1

The average of the number of cues needed to run a Novice level course is about 20. Notice that I did include a few low numbers and even a 1:1. I did this because you want to keep things interesting and variable. Being variable makes the training process more fun to your dog. The counting cues game is a great way to prepare your dog for competition. It is a great game for terriers or hounds. This game enables you to reinforce the dog when she leaves the ring and not lose attitude while she is still in the ring.

No Hope

Let's go back to the dog that has a sad attitude in the competition ring. How do you fix that? The answer is simple, yet complex. The simple part is finding a way for that dog to have the hope that she will be reinforced in the competition ring. The complex part is doing it when food and toys are not allowed in the competition ring. Find fun matches. If you can't find one, put on your own. Transport agility equipment to a park and ask your family and friends to come for a BBQ so they can be the fake agility trial audience. There you have it, your very own 'trial.' Now reinforce your dog in the ring.

Another crafty way to create hope is to take allowable toys with you into the ring. Teach your dog that your baseball

cap, shoelaces or other clothing are toys, you will have those objects in the ring.

Finally, the counting cues game will also help instill hope since you can reinforce your dog *after* she leaves the ring. Duplicate the system in training, as you do in competition, to help your dog have hope in the competition ring. Ask her to sometimes perform a segment, sometimes an entire course and then run out of the ring and reinforce her. Just as you will in competition.

Trainer Frustrations

Becoming frustrated with your dog is usually a fast track to a demotivated dog. Evaluate what causes you to become frustrated and prevent these triggers. If you can't prevent them, give your dog a jackpot and end the training session as soon as your frustration begins.

Mild frustration is part of most trainers' learning process. Frustration isn't all bad. A common source of frustration is failure. If the dog fails to perform the desired behavior, the trainer takes it personally. The dog's lack of, or incorrect, response is considered "deliberate" and this frustrates the trainer.

Depersonalizing canine, or human behavior, is a great emotional skill. One way to do this is to understand that failure really doesn't exist. When you are training, you only get outcomes. The outcome is either one that you wanted or one that you didn't. Either way, it is information and has nothing to do with you personally. If your dog fails to perform a behavior, it is information to consider and use to make changes to your training program.

Trainers can have power over their emotions by changing their thoughts. Emotions mostly follow thought, so by modifying your thoughts, you can control your emotions. Much easier said than done, but with practice it is a

wonderful skill to have. It will help you be a better trainer, and a better person.

Learned Laziness

Learned laziness is caused by non-contingent reinforcement. It can occur if you give your dog access to reinforcement for doing nothing. The dog learns to do nothing. The dog is a victim of lack of mental stimulation and has not been given the opportunity to discover how to play learning games.

Reversing learned laziness requires you to analyze what is reinforcing to your dog and plan how she is going to gain access to those reinforcers. Work to reduce the opportunity and need for self-reinforcing behaviors. Place your dog on a closed economy. For instance, have your dog work for all of her daily ration of food to help her learn that reinforcement is contingent on behavior. This is also a great way to increase your reinforcement history with your dog.

Training with Aversives

Trainer Rob Bitler once described a seminar he had attended where the presenter described how the animals they were training became aggressive when even mild aversives were used. In response, Rob jotted down in his notes, "How would the dogs that we train treat us in return if they had the power?" How would your dog train you? Let's strive to **click and play** train all dogs. A happy dog is a motivated dog.

Training with physical corrections or other aversives, is ideologically at odds with building attitude, speed and playing with your dog. Aversives include shouting at a dog, hitting, throwing things at your dog or squirting fluid at her. No matter what your training goal, it is not necessary to use aversives. World-class trainers have proven it is possible to succeed in agility and other canine sports without the use of aversives. Every time your dog

perceives you as using an aversive, you put a dent into your reinforcement history and damage your relationship.

Aversives can elicit fear and stress, which can be associated with the trainer, the agility obstacles or other aspects of training. Fear and stress are incompatible with play. If you are ever tempted to use an aversive, find another way.

Sea World Director of Training Chuck Tompkins often tells seminar participants about the lessons he learned regarding killer whale training and the use of aversives. When Sea World trainers first started working with killer whales, they used mild aversives to try to force the marine mammals into doing what they wanted. Tompkins says that the first time he decided to take the chance and ride on the back of a killer whale, the animal threw him off his back, took him to the bottom of the tank and held him there. The whale returned him to the surface, only to repeatedly dunk him under water. Tompkins wondered if he would live through this ordeal. In the end, the whale threw him out of the pool onto the stage. While lying on the deck Tompkins thought, “We need to change what we are doing.” It was this experience in particular that led Sea World to make a commitment to exclusively train with the use of positive reinforcement, both for the sake of the animals in their care and for the safety of the humans.

Dogs don't have the physical strength of a killer whale. A dog can't kill us in a split second with minimal effort. Why did it take an animal that could, for marine mammal trainers (and ultimately animal trainers all over the world) to begin to change?

Nothing can dampen motivation more than worry. Training aversives free is a fun way to avoid this problem and emphasize cooperation between dog and trainer. It is easy to avoid the risk of damaging your reinforcement history and your bond with your dog, just **click and play**.

Stress: The Ultimate Motivation Killer

Dogs are non-verbal. They growl and bark, but they don't use or understand words. They live in a world of smells and body language. It is possible to see a dog's stress level by reading her body language. By watching for tiny changes in your dog's body language, you can learn what your dog is telling you.

Barking or nipping at the trainer can be signs of frustration. Frustration can occur because of inconsistent training, too much arousal or a too-low of a rate of reinforcement.

Your dog's facial expression, body posture and the position of the ears and tail are important. Below is a list of some of the common signs of canine stress. Use this list to help read your dog.

Signs of Stress

- Slow tail wagging — contrary to popular belief, a slow tail wag can be a sign of stress and may be a signal that a dog is about to become aggressive.
- Holding breath — observe the rib cage and body muscles for tension, or place a hand on your dog to feel.
- Panting — check the dog's facial expression for stress panting rather than regular "Gee, I'm hot!" panting; observe for tightening of muscles around the eyes, as if squinting; look for context if there is no reason for the dog to be panting temperature-wise, the motivation for the panting is more likely to be stress.



Notice that this dog's lips are not curled upward to reveal rear teeth. The lack of lip curling shows that this pant is a stress pant. The slight squinting of the eyes is also indicating stress. In general, facial muscles appear tense.

- Pacing — an inability to settle.
Shedding and dandruff — commonly seen at the veterinarian's office.
- Excessive drooling.
- Gulping — swallowing hard and bracing for what is to come.
- Diarrhea.
- Urination — more common in male dogs than in females. In multiple dog households, one or several males may engage in stress induced urine marking.
- Licking of the lips — tongue flicking is a clear sign of nervousness.
- Coughing.
- Sneezing — if I give my Border Collie, Nicki, a cue she is not sure of, I get sneezing. Confusion is stressful to her.
- Turning away and avoiding eye contact — while this may be a training issue, it is important to take note and evaluate if this dog is experiencing stress. It can be a sign of worry when the handler leads out ahead of the dog at the start of a course especially if the dog is young or inexperienced.
- Trembling — usually extreme stress.
- Shaking (as if the dog were shaking off water) — if observed during training or at competition it may be a sign of stress.
- Yawning — no, you're not boring your dog, but she might be stressed.



Notice the extreme tensing of the muscles around the eyes, the exaggerated large yawn and pulling back of the lips.

Photo by Suzanne Rider

- Sweaty paws — a sign of severe nervous tension if the dog is not overheated.
- Increased activity — a canine favorite is the zoomies, when a dog takes off and starts running around the agility ring full speed.
- Decreased activity — some dogs will take a nap, flop on their side or curl up when feeling anxious. This is the denial nap, “this isn’t really happening, when I wake up it will all be gone.”
- Scratching — if not caused by stress, be sure to check the dog’s skin for rashes, allergies or parasites.
- “Spacing out” — the dog mentally leaves the trainer after failure or confusion.
- Refusing food — a sign of severe stress if the dog is normally food motivated.
- Refusing to play — if your dog normally plays and can’t play in a certain environment the dog is probably stressed.
- Drooping ears — dogs that are stressed will pin their ears back or lower their ears.



Notice in addition to hiding behind some furniture, this dog’s ears are being held back against his neck. He is also stress panting. Note the tense muscles around his right eye and the nervous curl of his lips backwards toward his neck. His eyes are also somewhat glazed.

Photo by Andrea Davis

If any of these behaviors appear while you are training, evaluate what in the environment is causing the stress. Is it your training? If so, back up a few steps in the training process, help her succeed, and then build up to the previous level of training. Increase your rate of reinforcement. Play a game, do something different. Experiment and learn what will help reduce your dog's tension. Is the source of tension a person, dog or object near by? You can determine this by carefully approaching the person, dog or object and monitoring your dog's body language. If the signs of nervousness increase, you know the person, dog or object is the source of the stress.

Gradually bringing your dog closer to what she is afraid of while playing and feeding her, will help her work through the fear. The speed of progress is dictated by the dog, not the trainer. When in doubt progress more slowly and resist the temptation to push your dog. Gradually desensitizing your dog to a fearful stimulus is a process and can take months or even years. Usually the more powerful the fear the longer the process will take.

The effects of tension are very powerful. A stressed dog may be more likely to act in an aggressive manner, so when you see signs of anxiety it is best to take steps to reduce your dog's stress level. If you can identify the stressor, move the dog away from it.

Tension is cumulative; if your dog is in the presence of several stressors, manage her even more carefully. A dog that is anxious in the presence of an unfamiliar dog will be very stressed at an agility trial. At the end of a long three-day agility trial, that same dog may not be able to handle that environment anymore. Tension has depleted the dog's coping resources. The dog now has fewer resources to call on and is at higher risk for aggressive behavior.

Help your dog deal with her anxieties by pairing stressors with play! If your dog stresses around loud noises,

gradually expose your dog to loud noises while playing with the dog. Ultimately, a loud noise will signal to your dog that it is time to play!

Mental Illness

While it has not been proven, growing evidence suggests that dogs suffer from a wide array of biochemical mental illnesses. Just like humans, dogs are prescribed Prozac and other serotonin targeting drugs for a variety of symptoms that include aggression, anxiety and fear. While medication may not offer a cure, it does offer a decrease in symptoms for some dogs.

If you think your dog is suffering from mental illness, no amount of training will modify the symptoms. Causes for mental illness are not clearly understood. This is not something that can usually be altered through behavior modification or motivational games. Find a vet who is willing to work with you regarding medication, nutrition and exploring medical causes that may be causing the mental illness.

Potential Solutions

Motivational challenges present the trainer with puzzles that can usually be solved. The more severe your dog's motivational issue, the more you can learn. Trainers who have never worked with a difficult to motivate dog, have missed out on a fantastic learning experience. If you have an opportunity to learn from your dog, make the best out of it!

Every dog is an individual. What will motivate your dog depends on her personality and your persistence in finding what she likes. The solutions to your dog's motivational challenges are only limited by your creativity and determination.

Be creative with your food and toy delivery. Use different types of food in different quantities. Have a variety of toys

and use a different one every day. Play a variety of games with the toys that you use. Be fun and unpredictable. Don't allow toy or food dependency to creep into your games.

Focus

Sometimes a dog can appear to be lacking motivation, but in fact really lacks focus. Here are some ideas and considerations for a dog that lacks focus.

Use clear signals to indicate when you are working and when you are not. Consistently implement those signals. The signal that always means “work time” is a cue. A special cue such as “all done,” can signal that all training games have stopped and the dog is free to do as she pleases. Only after you give the “all done” cue is your dog free to do as she pleases. Avoid conversation with people while your dog is working; give her 100% of your focus.

Lots of short **click and play** sessions will help focus problems. Play is the behavior most incompatible with stress and some dogs lack focus because they are easily stressed. Carolyn Scott, musical freestyle and clicker trainer, showed me how to use a cheese stick as a toy. You grab the cheese stick by one end like a sword, tap it on the ground and swing it in front of the dog's face. This teasing is really a fun game. Scott emphasizes that the dog's movement, tugging and play, all act as de-stressing tools. Scott also recommends pairing different games with different toys. Creating a separate personality for each toy to help encourage us to be more fun and varied.

The counting cues game mentioned earlier in this chapter on page 108, is very helpful in building focus. Dogs can suffer from focus fatigue. Gradually build up the number of cues you give while playing the counting cues game.

The stimulus control game is a great one to add to your toolbox. Stimulus control means the behavior is performed consistently on the first cue, and the behavior only occurs when it is cued. It doesn't take a lot of thinking to realize that we all have many behaviors trained that require good stimulus control. Some behaviors like sit and down, will always occur off cue, but others can be trained to a level of optimum stimulus control. Every time your dog fails to respond to the first cue you give, is a signal to you that additional training is needed.

Fluency creates flow and flow is reinforcing. A break in flow will cause a lot of dogs to lose focus. Work to maintain flow and to teach your dog a default behavior for when flow is broken. If you get lost on a course, cue the dog to hand target or some other simple behavior to help her recover from the break in flow.

Non-response alert! Red flag all non-responses so that you are immediately aware that the behavior needs training. A missed cue not only interferes with your performance, it may also break flow and create stress or loss of focus.

Self-reinforcing behaviors can be a key to maintaining behavior chains. Which obstacles does your dog enjoy performing? Use those cues to reinforce other behaviors in the agility ring. Arnie, my mom's Jack Russell Terrier, hates to sit at the start line, but he loves to play patty cake (the trick during which the dog places alternating paws on the alternating feet of the trainer).



To exploit Arnie's love of the patty cake game, my mom sets him at the start, asks him to sit and then reinforces him with patty cake. She can take this game into the competition agility ring.

Photo by Angelica Steinker

Maintaining Motivation and Speed

Once you have your dog motivated and responding to cues consistently, increase your criteria. Click and reinforce only fast and accurate responses. Was the dog's response accurate? If the answer is yes, next ask yourself was the response fast? If the answer is yes, click and reinforce the dog. Go through this question and answer process quickly so the timing of your click is not affected.

If you lose accuracy, go back and work accuracy. Once you have accuracy you can use differential reinforcement of excellent behavior (DRE) to select for fast responses only. In agility training, once the dog is in maintenance, and the behavior has been proofed and generalized, the only clicks and reinforcers given will be for excellent performance. While you must fade the clicker, you will occasionally bring it back and unpredictably click and reinforce to avoid the degrading and resulting loss of motivation.

Motivational Games

Below are games that can be used specifically to build motivation.

The 'I'm-gonna-beat-you-game' was developed by Rhonda Carter. Playfully tell your dog "I'm gonna beat you!" and then gently slap and tap your dog's sides to get her revved up for a great game of tug. If "I'm gonna beat you" predicts play, then the phrase will take on reinforcing properties. You can then use this phrase to prompt a peppy and fun attitude.

The race game is a classic motivational game. Originally developed by obedience trainers, it is a great game to build confidence and to encourage the dog to work ahead of you. To play this game, ask your dog to sit-stay and toss a toy two-feet away from you. On your release "okay," race her to the toy. If she gets to the toy first, she brings it to you for a game of tug. (Only play this game if your dog

knows how to play fetch.) If you get to it first, you play with it by yourself to tease her. With soft dogs, play this game many times allowing the dog to win. Not letting a soft dog win may result in her not wanting to play. For dogs that are not toy motivated, race them to a food-stuffed toy. The winner eats the food.

Dogs that don't want to move ahead of their handlers greatly benefit from the race game. Always start with a short distance and build up to longer distances. As your dog speeds up, cheat by taking a head start. This will encourage her to run as fast as she can.

The popping the clutch game. If your dog has motivational issues when getting started with an agility course or segment, play this game a few times per week. Popping the clutch is played by requiring a sit-duration (self-control) while you verbally wind the dog up. Elicia Calhoun uses "ready, ready steady?" When her dog hears this phrase, she becomes excited and tenses all of her muscles and is ready to play. If the dog demonstrates the proper self-control, you can release her with an enthusiastic "okay" followed by a game of tug. Self-control starts the game. If she is unable to hold position, make it easier by whispering "ready, ready steady?" This game is a great way to build motivation and to proof your start line sit!

Flyball Games

Dogs love the game of flyball. The world of flyball has a lot of information regarding motivation and play training. Flyball trainers love restrained recalls. Grab the longest tug toy you can find, and have a person hold your dog by the chest, or in front of the hind legs as pictured below.



Angelica is restraining Rev while Suzanne is teasing him and running out ahead of him (not pictured).

Photo by Tony Rider

Tease your dog with the tug toy, then drag it on the ground behind you as you take off running. On your release cue “come,” your helper releases your dog, who dashes to you and the toy. Once your dog gets the idea, vary the game by sometimes dragging the toy and sometimes hiding it and pulling it out when she catches up to you. You don’t want toy dependency. Flyball people put a lot of energy into playing this game. That energy makes it fun for both the dog and the human.

Be creative; invent your own motivational games. Vary the games that your dog has already learned to keep things interesting and fun. Read your dog’s body language and let it guide you.

Enhancing Speed

Professional dolphin trainer Kevin Krueger explains that when he is training for speed, he often clicks and reinforces just for the initiation of the behavior. He clicks for just starting to respond to a cue he has given and then reinforces. To apply this to agility, click a dog for just approaching the table, weaves or whatever obstacle you are trying to build motivation for and then reinforce.

At every level of training be sure you are getting the attitude you want before raising criteria. Don’t ask your dog to do two jumps if you cannot get one jump with the right attitude. Keep training one jump until you have your dog flying over that jump, then move on to two jumps.

All we can do is our best and all the dog can do is her best. Motivation is part science and part art, and that is the challenge and the joy of it. Training is a game, so play it for fun. Dogs are truth detectors, they know whether you are truly having fun or not. The single most powerful thing you can do to increase your dog’s motivation is to have fun with her.