

For well-behaved pet, take tips from zoo trainers

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You'll never have to teach a panda to walk on a leash. But if any kind of animal lives in your house, trainers at the zoo have some useful lessons for you.

Modern training methods rely on a simple principle of learning: If an action has a pleasurable consequence, the animal will repeat it. Or as animal behaviorist Emily Weiss puts it, "If it feels good, do it again."

So it should be easy to mold a pet's behavior — reward it when it does what we like, and don't when it doesn't. But getting the details right can be a challenge, whether with a panda or a pup, and that's often because we don't understand what is actually rewarding to the animal.


The simplest type of reward-based training involves food, and it's incredibly powerful. It works with animals that don't care about pleasing us, or that we can't even safely get near. Weiss has trained a Komodo dragon to enter a crate using food.

But it's critical to realize that food is not all that's rewarding, and that the alternatives may be unexpected, such as when Weiss found that Aldabra tortoises could be rewarded in training by having their necks stroked.

Being aware of other possible rewards can help if your pet is not particularly food motivated, but it's far more important than that. If you're not aware of everything that's rewarding to an animal, you may be accidentally training it to do exactly what you don't want.

Weiss tells of a time when she was trying to train a group of chimps using their favorite food reward, Jello jigglers, to hold still for injections. But she couldn't even get to the first step: getting

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ACT NATURALLY

A wild animal can't be physically manipulated like a pet can. If a lion won't sit, it's a bad idea to try to push its back legs underneath it to give it the idea. These limitations force trainers to use their imagination, and the resulting methods can be useful to pet trainers as well.

One useful technique is to take a natural action and put a command to it. Laurie Thompson, biologist of primates and pandas at the National Zoo, says that this method is used to train the pandas in many behaviors, such as opening their mouths so that their teeth can be examined and extending their front legs for blood draws.

Rather than trying to force or elicit any of these movements, keepers simply "capture" the natural behavior by rewarding the panda when it opens its mouth on its own, and associate a word to the action.

If you're a dog owner, try this method to train your pup to eliminate on

rewarding to many of the chimps than getting a treat, the solution was simple. When humans stopped responding in an interesting way, the behavior stopped.

Many pet problems arise the same way and the solution may be just as straightforward. If your dog jumps up on you when you come home, it's because your reaction, like Weiss's to the chimps, is rewarding. Try turning your back and not making eye contact or speaking until he stops jumping, and the behavior should eventually disappear.

In other cases you may also need to think about how to prevent the behavior before it starts. Consider a dog that barks constantly, or what zookeepers call stereotypical behaviors, such as pacing up and down the same part of an exhibit.

The first step is the same: Be sure that you're not accidentally rewarding the behavior. But after that, your best bet isn't trying to train the animal to stop doing something.

Rather, says Lisa Stevens, curator of pandas and primates at the National Zoo, "Change the environment that elicits the behavior."

This requires some observation.

For pandas, keepers may notice that pacing starts at a certain time of day, for example, and changing the animal into a different enclosure before that time may be all that's needed. Likewise, if you figure out that your dog's barking begins when a person or dog walks by, the best solution may be restricting access to the room that faces the street, or not leaving him in the yard alone — much simpler than the big project of training the dog to stop barking on command.

Finally, like a good animal keeper, make sure that your pet's lifestyle allows him to exercise his natural abilities.

Part of what zoos call "enrichment" is providing a complex environment that allows an animal to perform its natural behaviors. A panda that has opportunities to climb and search for food is less likely to pace.

Likewise a dog needs enough exercise and chances to use his brain. In fact, both pandas and dogs enjoy the many types of puzzle feeders that are now available.

Give your dog enough chances to be a dog, and he'll get into less trouble.

"Often behavior problems in dogs are because they're not living in an enriched environment," says Stevens.

A food treat isn't necessary "â€ it may distract, and the comfort of an empty bladder is its own reward. It may take a couple of weeks of repetition but eventually when you say your command, the dog will start looking for a place to go.

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