



THE POWER OF SOCIAL INTERACTIONS AS REWARDS

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Put down the cookies for a moment. Can you bring yourself to the table for your dog? You might be very surprised to learn how powerful social interaction can be as a reward.

By Suzanne Clothier

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A trainer friend asked me, "Do you use treats when working with a dog who is worried, fearful, reactive or otherwise having trouble, or do you use social contact (voice tone, touch, etc) as the reward? I am certain that 'it depends' is an important part of the answer. But what do you use most frequently?"

I had to chuckle. "It Depends" is my bumper sticker for life. Most of all, it depends on what the dog says works for him in the moment. But how specifically to achieve that?

First, we back up a bit to what I call the First Elemental Question: "Hello?" By beginning here, at the most elemental point of any relationship, I am asking the animal if they would be interested in a conversation. Answers range from YES! to "maybe" to NO to "go away, you're scaring me" to "go away or I will bite you." And all shades of grey in between.

What I do after that initial question has been asked depends very much on the answer. For this article, let's focus on normal dogs without any intense fear, irritation, anger, frustration or the dogs who are asocial or simply disinterested in ME. Let's assume the dog has said, "Okay - I could consider a conversation with you."

Initially, I frequently employ a strong combo of very high value treats plus - always, forever, no exception, the real deal! - authentic engagement: social interaction. This is built of eye contact, body language, voice, breathing, intensity, movement and touch. The specific combination I create is tailored to that individual dog. The dog's behavior drives my behavior.

Long before I work with the dog on something specific however, I've been assessing what he finds valuable & interesting, and observing how he utilizes space socially, what he does in response to me and my body language, eye contact, movements and voice, and his response to the treats (or toys) available. So then I have a starting point from which I move into working with him. All of that happens really fast, by the way. And keeps changing, moment to moment.

Regardless of the specific combo, however, one thing quickly becomes apparent to the dog: I am really present for him, alert to him, and adjusting my behavior based on what he does. This is powerful stuff for any social animal, this notion that you are the center of another's full attention and interest. The combination is adjusted as fast as I am humanly capable to keep it effective for that dog in that moment.

How much the social interaction means depends on the individual dog and that relationship. The interaction itself may be more valuable than any non-social reward. It wouldn't matter much if a stranger told you how wonderful you were but it might if he gave you \$1000 bills as he told you. But being told you're wonderful by someone who matters a great deal to you could mean much more to you than any monetary reward.

Conversely, there are things that you would find so difficult or scary or unpleasant that even from a beloved friend, praise/encouragement alone would not be sufficient. The equation would need to be balanced out with some heavy duty reinforcements. A trusted friend who was also handing you \$1000 bills could probably get you to work through even some difficult stuff.

The inherent power of social interaction is wildly underestimated by trainers, I think. Dogs tell me I'm quite right about this one. I often have the same treats as the handler. What I offer that the dog finds so intensely valuable is the social interaction provided at a high degree of coherence & congruity. Everything in me truly says to the dog that I'm working to connect with him.

Finding the appropriate balance for each dog depends very much on first being aware that an equation of social/non-social reinforcers exists. In my experience, many trainers seem unaware of the concept or have only a rudimentary grasp of the concept.

Trainers also need to understand that this is a delicate balance and highly contextual/situational. The balance can and does readily shift, and can be radically different in various situations. Assuming you know what the dog finds valuable can be a mistake. Ask the dog what works in that moment.

The handler needs to be able to really "be there" and both willing and able to invest themselves in an authentic way. Dogs will not fall for less than the real deal. Coherence, congruity and continuity matter to dogs, just as they do to people. You must be lined up body/mind/soul with what you're intending to offer the dog by way of connection with you. Incongruous, disconnected or incoherent intent/actions will make any intelligent creature doubtful of the value of interacting with you.

The relationship and the social interaction must be valuable to the dog. People would like to think it is so automatically, but it ain't always so! In some situations, the social aspect counts for a lot, in other situations, not so much. Don't take it personally,

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but do take it seriously when a dog says that social interactions or relationships aren't important to him in that moment.

In the case of fear/anxiety, trainers must understand that trust/respect/relationship only go so far. If they went as far as some trainers seem to think, none of us would be afraid of snakes or spiders once a trusted & beloved friend showed us how wonderful snakes & spiders are! Respect the fear/anxiety as separate from the relationship. Understand that the relationship can be an important support, but cannot be superimposed over the fear/anxiety with the plan to 'erase' the fear. I am always deeply saddened by people who say, "If only he trust me more, he would know he was safe" in a situation where the dog clearly felt anything but safe... Safety is an intensely personal assessment.

Understand that social interaction can be a serious and often unwelcome/unhappy pressure for many dogs, so it must be used with care and with respect to what the dog has to say about it. Easy parallel - you're really worried about something, and a well meaning friend keeps telling you, "It's okay, I'm here for you, you can do this, it's all going to turn out fine, here have a cookie, and you're doing great, and we're going to get thru this blah, blah, blah" non-stop till you want to scream because that kind of contact with that friend in that moment is just adding to your stress, not helping in any way however well intentioned the friend might be. Just like people, dogs differ in what they find supportive. Some find a gentle stream of information very comforting & useful, others find the room (mentally, emotionally and/or physically) to think and process makes it easier to cope. One must actually ask the dog himself what works for him, and then do that, no matter what your individual preferences or style might be. While you might like a stream of comfort, he might not; while you might prefer to be left alone, he may not. Ask the dog!

I use food treats to underline "what a great choice!" and to create the best possible balance in the intrinsic/extrinsic reinforcement equation. Obviously, where there is a damaged or no established relationship (such as I face when working in a seminar setting with any unknown dog), then food carries greater weight, and serves to make me more interesting to the dog. And yet even with unknown dogs, I am totally with them to the best of my ability.

Social creatures of any species do not miss the authenticity of someone trying to connect to them, trying hard to listen, keeping as tight a feedback loop as can be done in that moment. It's understood and appreciated. Best of all, the powerful gift of your attention and focus are always available to be given - a genuine connection from who we are to who that animal is in that moment.