



# Use of food rewards at Guide Dogs



# Introduction

The way we train and interact with our dogs is based on four guiding principles:



## Know

We understand dogs as a species and get to know each of our dogs as an individual, including their needs and preferences.



## Manage for success

We manage the environment, our dogs and ourselves to set the stage for success, while also preventing our dogs from practicing unwanted behaviours.



## Teach/train

We tailor training for each individual dog, using rewards that motivate them best. We teach our dogs using positive reinforcement.



## Partner

We're here to support people with sight loss to live actively, independently, and well. So, we have a commitment to person-centred practice AND dog-centred practice. We always aim to meet the needs of both parties.



## Know

### **Dogs have co-evolved to live with and alongside humans.**

We have a shared history going back between 15-30,000 years. Domestic dogs are not predators but scavengers. Even dogs that become feral rarely survive by hunting – they naturally remain in and around human settlements, seeking food where they can find it. This means that dogs are hard wired to seek out food from humans and their shared environment. Science tells us that many animal species, including dogs, prefer to work for food rather than get it ‘for free.’ Most dogs (maybe especially our breeds of dogs!) love food. So, we can use the dog’s natural instincts to our advantage to reward them for desirable behaviours and enrichment. If dogs learn to associate their handler with the provision of food, they are much less likely to seek food from the environment.

We get to know the individual dogs and learn what motivates them best, so tailor the amount of food used to get the best results in training. For some dogs this may mean less food rewards and more play or social rewards, such as praise and stroking.



## Manage for success

**Dogs have a hard wired tendency to seek out food, because of this we need to take care to manage the dog's behaviour around food.**

Stealing or scavenging food will by its very nature reinforce this behaviour. Dogs who manage to steal food from a kitchen counter or tabletop will be highly likely to do so again! So, we need to ensure that we manage the environment so that the dog doesn't get the opportunity to steal food – we may use baby gates or closed doors, avoid leaving a dog unattended in a room with food within reach. We should also manage the dog when food is being prepared or when people are eating. Levels of management can be reduced as the dog learns manners around food, so for example, once the dog has been taught to rest on their bed while food is being prepared, there will be no need to exclude them from the room.



## Teach / Train

**We have a commitment to reward based training and food makes for a highly effective reward.**

It is quick and easy to use and enables lots of repetitions when training. This means dogs learn tasks faster and more accurately compared to not using food. Dogs trained with food and other desirable rewards gain a strong positive association with guiding work and this results in happy, confident guide dogs with excellent problem-solving skills.

Food is highly rewarding to dogs, so if we are to use food to our advantage, and prevent unintended consequences, we need to teach the dog food manners. Our dogs are taught to take food from our hands gently, and not to reach towards us for food – they must only take food when we offer it to them. We have a range of food manners exercises that we teach our pups and our dogs to ensure that they learn appropriate manners. For example, we may teach a dog to go to their bed when food is being prepared or people are eating, so that they don't learn to hang around people in the hope of a tasty, dropped item!

In the early stages of learning, we use a lot of food – this is called having a high rate of reinforcement and allows us to quickly teach a dog a task. But once the dog has learnt a task reliably, for example, stopping at the down kerb, food rewards are gradually reduced, to be replaced by other rewards such as physical and verbal praise, or simply the opportunity to carry on moving forwards. All dogs are individuals, we will select the rewards that work best for each dog, partnership, and context.



## Partner

### **During partnership training, food rewards will be increased again.**

This allows an opportunity for the guide dog owner to learn how the dog has been trained and practice the skills they need to use food accurately and well. Using food during these early stages is also great for building a strong relationship and helps the dog to gain confidence with their new partner. As the partnership develops and their confidence and skills increase, food can start to be reduced again. For established partnerships it is not always necessary to continue using food as a reward. Verbal and physical praise, and the enjoyment of working together, is often enough to keep the dogs' skills and confidence high.

However, thoughtful use of food is often of benefit, even for well-established partnerships. This will help a guide dog to maintain skills, confidence, and concentration. Remember, that we know dogs prefer to work for food rather than receive it for free!



## Use of food by people with sight loss

**We always ensure that our training methods can be transferred to meet the needs of people with sight loss.**

Learning about positive reinforcement, including use of food as a reward, is a key element of our teaching during the early stages of creating new partnerships.

But people with sight loss have some challenges to face in deciding when and how to use food as a reward for desired behaviour. For example, a sighted trainer will be able to use food as a reward for a guide dog walking past another dog or ignoring a tempting piece of food on the pavement. A handler with a vision impairment may not recognise these events and so miss an opportunity to reward the dog.

It's for these reasons that we may advise a guide dog owner to use food at set points of a route – perhaps at a destination or at a kerb. These reinforcement points build up a strong 'reinforcement history' and act almost as a 'magnet' to the dog – meaning they are much less likely to lose concentration, become distracted or be disappointed if a genuine reward opportunity is not recognised by their guide dog owner.

These predictable reinforcement points are especially useful in the early months of a guide dog partnership, for example when building a new route or when needing to improve performance. Guide dog mobility specialists will coach guide dog owners on how to continue to use food rewards effectively should they need to in future.



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