



In Praise of Praise

When we work hard at our job, our paycheck is one of the rewards we're working for. But isn't it nice when a co-worker or our boss pats us on the back and says, "Well done." It gives us incentive to work harder.

The same applies in dog training. For your dog, his "paycheck" is a combination of food reward and praise from you. And he will work without food, as long as you praise enough so that he has the incentive to continue.

It's recognized that dogs trained with more gentle, positive methods are happier workers and just as reliable, if not more so, than those trained with a heavy hand. There are still many trainers who insist that the only way to succeed is to physically dominate the dog. But that is not the best way.

Your goal is to create a team of person and dog working together. You're in charge, with your dog an obedient partner. That can be achieved quicker and retained longer when you use positive methods. The dog that works because he's afraid not to is not as calm, content or creative. The dog that works with you as well as for you, because he knows there are positive consequences when he does what you command is solid and confident.

So you have to know how to praise your dog. Some people cannot bring themselves to offer praise to anyone or anything. Perhaps they've not heard much praise themselves throughout their lives, so it's difficult for them to give it. On the other hand, some people praise their dogs all the time, using the same high pitched tone whether they are pleased with their dogs or not. Then praise loses all meaning.

Praising another human is generally different than praising a dog. When we compliment each other: "You look lovely tonight," "That was a great speech you gave," we are communicating almost exclusively with words. Our tone of voice doesn't change very much. We clearly don't sound angry, but we use the same tone as normal conversation. If you tell your dog he looks lovely, and you say it in a normal conversational tone, he won't have any idea that you've give him praise. But if you get all bubbly and excited and say, "You're the ugliest thing I've ever seen," your dog will respond as if you complimented him. Your tone of voice is the key.

Think about this from your dog's point of view. He begins life within a litter, instinctively seeking warmth and sustenance from his mother and comfort and play from his siblings. The high pitched happy sounds of his littermates signal amusement and fun. That's his conditioning, and it lasts his whole life. He will always associate that tone with positives. He will also come to learn that certain words have a positive meaning, just as certain words have a negative meaning. But he won't know that instinctively. Your tone of voice when using words will condition him.