

Training with Joy

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In recent years the dog training world has become increasingly focused on reinforcing (rewarding) “good” behavior (the behavior we humans want), rather than correcting “bad” behavior (the behavior we don’t like). Food rewards are effective and easy to use for the majority of dogs, and the pet industry makes sure that we have a mindboggling array of options to choose from. Likewise, for the toy-obsessed, pet store aisles are similarly full of options. But what often drops out of the training-behavior equation is emotion - the power of a truly joyful response to our dog’s efforts in working with and for us.

Recently I was thinking about this as I was walking with my Australian Cattle Dog, Rocket. I like to make our morning walks fun and varied for her, mixing fast paced walking (for me) with training and games (for Rocket). Much of the time she is on leash, but she has a warp-speed recall and the traffic is sparse so she also gets to run free and explore along the side of the road as well.

One of our favorite things is a hunt and fetch game. I throw her orange rubber ball far into the wetlands beside the road, and her job is to track and retrieve it. I try to fake her



out and make it really hard to find the ball; she does her level best to hunt it out as fast as she can. Usually she is successful, but on this occasion, she just could not find it. She raced down a muddy bank, pounded through a creek, waded through marshy ground, sniffed every bush, battled through salmonberry thickets, and got thoroughly muddy and exhausted. But she did not give up, even though I had secretly lost hope and begun to plan our next trip to Mini-Pet Mart.

After a full 15 minutes of sustained hunting (which, for a human, is a long wait and for a dog on the hunt is a blink in time and pure joy), she found her ball. I was genuinely impressed and thrilled at her ability and her success. When she came to me, eyes shining, ball clamped firmly between her teeth, I wanted to get down on my knees and hug her right there on the rain-sodden ground. But hugs aren't her thing, especially when she is jazzed from hunting. So I let her chomp on her ball for a bit, and just watched her and savored the moment.

When she had calmed down and was ready to make contact, I squatted down beside her and gave her a really good rub exactly where she likes it, lavished her with praise, and told her sincerely how proud of her I was. In that moment, I was entirely focused on contact with her, and heartfelt in my communication. I got the distinct impression that she received this, and her eyes shone even brighter. We walked off together and she had a strut in her step, a carriage to her tail that said to me that she knew she had done well, and was all the happier for it. That moment was worth a million treats!

Lest I be mistaken for an anti-treat trainer, let me emphasize that I'm not saying that praise is intrinsically better than food as a reinforcer, or that toys are better rewards than treats. Every dog is different, and different types of reward suit different tasks, circumstances and people. What I want to convey is the importance of expressing joy when we are working and having fun with our dogs. This is a foundational way to strengthen desirable behaviors and deepen rapport. And as with any foundation, if it is sound, whatever is built on it will be all the more stable and long-lasting.

Strangely, the simple expression of joy when working with our dogs can take effort on our part – we have to slow down, notice what we are feeling, and resist the urge to take the easy option of reaching for a treat, in order to express our positive feelings in ways that our dogs understand and appreciate. But that really isn't so hard to do, as a recent exercise in one of our PPOC Training & Support groups made clear. Participants were invited to use joyful enthusiasm to get their dogs' tails wagging for a full 30

seconds. Happy voices, exuberant body language, smiling, laughing, petting and praise filled the room. The atmosphere changed instantly; everyone was affected, and subsequent training exercises went all the better for it. So next time your dog does something that makes you happy, take time to notice and show your dog how you feel. You'll both be so glad you did!

