



Maplewood Dog Training

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The Power of Praise

by Katrin Andberg

Today I'd like to talk about the power and importance of genuine praise in dog training and what elements create powerful praise as well as how you can use praise and other reinforcers in training your dog to build value into you as an important being and person in your dog's life.

First let's talk about what creates powerful praise. Praise is only powerful when your dog believes that it is genuine. Genuine praise is all about tone, inflection and emphasis and the underlying belief that what you are praising your dog for is true. We often try to lie to our dogs with praise that we don't truly believe is necessary or worthwhile, and, as can be seen by our dog's behavior oftentimes, when our dogs don't believe our praise, then it loses effectiveness very quickly.

Praise also loses effectiveness when one does not have a genuine tone, inflection and emphasis on the behavior you want to see repeated or reinforced. Praise is often time done 'flatly' or lacking proper inflection. It is often times done in a tone your dog may not find truly rewarding and view as praise. And many times when praising their dog, people emphasizes syllables or words that may not be as effective as they could be. Listen to "Good boy, what a good boy, you are Perfect!" The tone is truly believable to your dog, the inflection is upbeat and honest and the emphasis is on the "Go-ood" and "Per-fect"

Now let's talk about how to use genuine, emphatic and powerful praise to build value into you as a wonderful, important and influential person in your dog's life. Many people think that their dog should naturally find them valuable, want to be with them, want to obey them, think that their praise is worthwhile, but what people are forgetting is that we humans are not intrinsically valuable to dogs. Things that are intrinsically valuable to dogs are called primary reinforcers and are things that your dog finds valuable on a biological level to survive. Primary and intrinsic reinforcers include- food, water, shelter, the ability to void. Because we are not naturally valuable to our dogs, we are considered secondary reinforcers, and we have to do something to cause a dog to want to view us as valuable and there are two ways we could do that. One way would be to pair ourselves with something the dog already finds valuable, such as food and create love for us, as a valuable being in our dog's life, by transferring your dog's love for food into love for you. The second way is to build value into us by pairing ourselves with something the dog would rather avoid if he didn't value us, which is how traditional, force based dog training builds value into praise. This second way, creating value for you through something worse your dog would rather avoid, we find to be incredibly stressful for both dogs and their compassionate owners. Pairing ourselves, our praise, our attention with primary reinforcers, such as food, is significantly less stressful on both dogs and owners and often seen as very enjoyable and fun for both parties!

When training our dogs using primary reinforcers, like food treats, where many owners often get hung up is that the food becomes a lure or a bribe and the dog becomes dependent on it and the owner never built value into them or their praise for their dog. When training with primary reinforcers in order to build value into you, as a secondary reinforcer, you need to have your genuine praise, your attention, and your affection come *before* the food reinforcer. If the genuine emphatic praise comes first, before the food reward comes out, and both are delivered within the 1-3 second cause and effect window, then your dog will quickly begin to find your praise as valuable, and if not more so than the food reward.

Another important part of the puzzle of how to build value into you as an important valuable being in your dog's life is also the degree that you genuinely praise and tell your dog when he is making appropriate behavioral choices. It is very easy for us to focus on the negative and only pay attention to behavior that our dog does that we don't like but it is amazing what happens when we instead focus and make a point of reinforcing behavior that we do like instead. When living, training and interacting with our dogs we need to be reinforcing, praising and rewarding good, appropriate behavior 4-5 times as often, if not more, as we tell the dog he has done something we don't like.

The power of praise comes with how we communicated it- with inflection, tone and emphasis, with when we use it- to build value into you as an important being in your dog's life by transferring your dog's love for food into love for you, and how often we use it to tell our dogs that he has done something that we love and his is the most perfect, best dog on earth.