

Client Information: Target Hand Incentive Plan

This program is designed to help you teach your dog to respond to you eagerly at all times. If your dog will not respond to you reliably when there are no distractions, it is unlikely that it will respond the way you wish when there are more interesting possibilities! Making your dog reliably responsive to you is an essential first step in any behavior modification plan.

A dog does what pays off best in its own mind. Your goal is to make your dog believe that the greatest pay off always comes from you. To do this you will teach the dog that the sight of your closed hand, presented like a fist (fingers curled in) with palm up towards the dog, signals the chance to earn a food payoff. First the dog learns to touch its nose to the target (your hand) for food rewards. This builds the dog's attention to the hand. With the dog focusing on the hand, and anticipating the reward inside, it becomes easier for the dog to *want* to sit, lie down, come, and to focus on the hand despite distractions. Many problem behaviors are not compatible with these simple commands, so think of the power you will have if you use these commands creatively and reward your dog for responding!

To convince your dog that you are always prepared, you will always have food in the hand for the first few months, until he stops thinking that you might not have it. Then you will gradually phase down the food according to the specific instructions given at the end of this handout. Yes, you will intermittently use food to reward your dog from here on out. But the reality is most dogs get 'treats' for doing nothing but looking adorable anyway! Your dog will just get them for responding well. Think of it as paycheck to keep your dog showing up for work!

The keys to making this program work include:

- 1) Your dog must believe there will always be food in the target hand, so **DON'T** use an empty hand for several months, and follow carefully the instructions for phasing food out of the hand. Carry food on your person at all times for the next few months so that you will always have the food available to put into your target hand before cueing the dog.
- 2) Make sure that the food is motivating to your dog.

The dog's regular food may be effective in most situations for many dogs. Measure out the amount you would normally feed them each day, and feed your dog from the target hand instead of from the bowl. Your dog can eat what is left from the bowl at the end of the day as long as he has responded eagerly to your target hand throughout the day. If he has not responded well, do not feed the balance of the food, or feed half of the remaining amount. The dog will then be hungrier the next day and more motivated to respond to the regular food. The goal is to increase motivation, not to have the dog lose weight, so please contact us if your dog is not responding reliably within three days.

Deep chested dogs, dogs with medical conditions that would be affected by this change in eating pattern, or dogs that do not eat well due to extreme anxiety may need to have these instructions modified. Please alert us if this is the case so that we can make modifications as necessary.

For some dogs it can be helpful to mix a few choice moist morsels of real meat or cheese into the baggie of regular food to enhance the flavor of the food overall and to provide occasional treasures of choice pieces. For all dogs, use higher value treats at times when your dog is more excited, afraid, or distracted.

changes direction. *Use this cue when you need the dog to walk away from something it is interested in, or to call the dog to an area instead of physically grabbing the dog to move it.*

Sit: When the dog is reliably following the hand, let it approach the hand, and then slowly raise the hand up and over the dog's head, as if you were trying to lead the dog's nose up and straight back over its own neck and shoulders. As the dog follows the hand, it will start to put more weight on its rear quarters in preparation to sit. As soon as you see this, open the hand and let the dog take the treat from your hand while it is still over the dog's head. Repeat several times, and until the dog sits in response to your hand motion. Remember to reward instantly. If the dog stands up again as you deliver the treat, you can let this go the first few times so the dog gets the 'sit' idea. However to teach the dog to stay sitting, be sure that once he is reliably going into a sit, you do not open the hand unless he is still sitting. If the dog starts to stand up as you deliver the treat, close your hand without delivering the reward, ask for the sit again, and reward quickly while the dog is in the 'sit'. *Practice this many times each day. 'Sit' is a good way for your dog to say 'please'. A dog that is sitting cannot jump on people, or chase the cat at the same time. Use this command creatively and combined with 'stay' to prevent undesired behavior. Remember that the rewards of complying must outweigh the rewards the dog would have gotten from the alternate activity!*

Lie Down: This is easiest to teach with your dog in the sit position. Once the dog is sitting, slowly move the target hand down between its front legs towards the floor. If the dog stands up, ask for the sit again, and make sure you are moving the hand slowly enough for the dog to follow it. Reward the dog as its head gets closer to the ground with its hind end still sitting. Repeat this multiple times until the dog lies down when you move the hand towards the floor. Lying down puts dogs in a more vulnerable position, so this is a difficult move for dogs that are anxious or concerned about remaining in control. The key is for the dog to learn that good things happen when it responds, so that it is less apprehensive. Some dogs learn to lie down in the first few tries, others take longer, but the key is to consistently reward closer and closer approximations to the final lying down response. Once your dog lies down readily when you ask, move the target hand slowly around towards the dog's flank, hip or tail. You want the dog to move over onto the opposite hip into a C-shaped down. This is a more relaxed form of down, again harder, and thus even more important for those more anxious dogs. *Use lie down with a rewarded stay as described below to ask for 'relaxation on cue'. Practice every day, building until you can reliably ask the dog to lie down and stay calmly despite distractions. Your dog can also be asked to 'stay' right near you, for example when company is over and you would like him to be quiet and not in the way.*

Stay: Start in a quiet setting with your dog sitting or lying down. Put your target hand behind your back, and ask your dog to 'stay' by using your other empty hand in a traffic cop 'stop' position, and saying the word. Take one step back, then instantly return to your dog and deliver a food reward and quiet verbal praise only (no petting). Immediately ask the dog to stay again using the verbal cue and the traffic cop hand, take one step back and return immediately to deliver the food reward and quiet verbal praise. Repeat this several times more, and then release the dog from the 'stay', in a very clear, but neutral manner. We don't want the dog looking forward to getting up – which will happen if you are very happy and excited about your release cue- but we do want him to learn to wait for the release. Waiting to be released helps build impulse control and teaches your dog to look to you for guidance and leadership. Do NOT call your dog out of the stay by saying 'come' because this teaches him to anticipate getting up. Go back to him and reward him so that he learns there is no reason to get up –which creates a more solid and relaxed stay. Gradually increase the distance you move from the dog OR the time interval before you return to give the food reward as SEPARATE steps. When your dog is staying reliably in neutral settings, add distractions in controlled doses. Start with minor distractions (like turning your back, or doing a jumping jack) and gradually build to larger distractions (like opening the door, or putting on your coat). Reward your dog much more often in distracting environments. If you find that he is breaking the stay before you get back to him, then you are asking for too much –reward him more quickly and/or don't move so far away from him. *Using these techniques, work on 'stay' every day, gradually building the*

amount of time your dog can be left and the distance you are from him until he can remain in a quiet stay for up to 30 minutes while you eat dinner, watch TV or read a book. This teaches your dog to relax on cue, which is again incompatible with many problem behaviors. Use creatively!

Come: At intermittent times during the day when the dog is in the house and very mildly interested in something else or is unfocused but awake, call the dog saying 'come' in an upbeat happy voice. Clap your hands or run backwards if necessary to encourage the correct response. As soon as the dog begins to come, hold the target hand out so that it has a goal to reach. When he approaches the hand and touches it, open the hand, and praise lavishly with an excited happy voice. Then release the dog again saying something like "go play", and turn away. The key features are the reward, which will be predicted for the dog by your upbeat happy voice and the target hand, and the release to 'go play'. *One of the main reasons dogs won't come when called is because they have learned that responding means that their fun will end because people call them to punish them, to lock them up when they leave for work, to distract them from something else that they were enjoying. Think of your dog as having a little calculator in its brain and make sure that the score for great outcomes for responding to come outnumber the 'bad' outcomes by at least 10 to 1.*

Watch the Target Hand: By now your dog should be responding eagerly and quickly when he sees the target hand. The 'watch' cue is one to tell him to look away from something else and look for the target hand instead. Choose a cue that you will use consistently that only means this one thing. Many dogs respond immediately to a short kissing noise, or you can use a short syllable word such as 'look' or 'watch'. With your dog mildly focused somewhere other than you, put the target hand out (he won't see it because he's looking elsewhere), and then make the noise or say the word. The instant he looks at the hand, open the hand and drop the food reward so that he is instantly rewarded for the 'look'. Over time as he 'looks' more and more quickly, you can build to where he comes to the hand first, and later to where he will swing around, sit and look at the hand in response to the cue. It is important that you have the hand out BEFORE you make the noise cue or he will not be able to look at the hand in response and you will not be able to reward with the correct timing. To build duration (i.e. he looks at the hand for longer and longer periods of time), once he is reliably turning quickly to look at the hand, count to yourself in seconds intervals, rewarding first within 1 second, but gradually building to incorporate longer 'looks'. For example in the first five tries, reward within one second of his attention to the hand. In the next five tries, reward three in one second and two in two seconds. In the next five tries, reward one in one second, three in two seconds and two in three seconds and so on, gradually building the duration he expects that he MIGHT have to wait for the reward, but keeping him guessing and alert for the intermittent very short waits. *Use this to take your dog's attention off of things you'd rather he not pay attention to. Practice often with low-level distractions to keep his response sharp. You want him to be always half listening, hoping to hear this cue that predicts an earning opportunity.*

PHASES OF FOOD USE

PHASE I - In this phase the dog learns to eagerly obey commands to come, sit, and lie down. Time 3 days to 3 months. -

- Carry food in a bag on your body when at home and awake.
- Always have food in the closed hand **before** each command.
- Reward the dog with food and attention for EACH eager response.
- Continue until the dog responds eagerly to come, sit, lie down, and stay.

Phase I ends when the dog is responding eagerly and quickly 100% of the time.

PHASE II - Time 10 days to 3 months. Phase II establishes an eagerness —to-please behavior with a (variable ratio schedule) intermittent reward system for food. The intermittent reward schedule for food is similar to a slot machine in Las Vegas, which also pays off on a variable ratio schedule. Slot machines pay off intermittently so that people will continue to eagerly pull the handle, hoping that next time, next time, next time will bring the

payoff (reward). If dogs cannot guess when the reward will come, they will continue to respond eagerly each time the closed hand is presented though the hand only opens intermittently. In Phase II dogs must learn that the food reward is **always in the closed hand**, but also must learn the hand will **not open** every time. The closed hand will open only when dogs are persistent in responding eagerly to an unpredictable schedule of food rewards. (example: late in phase II, you might open the hand to give 2 food rewards intermittently during 12 eager responses by the dog.)

- Continue to carry food in a bag on your body when you are at home and awake.
- Start variable ratio schedule of reinforcement for food (slot machine schedule).
***** **Always have food in the closed hand before each command, but do not open the closed hand to give food for each response.** *****

Example of variable ratio (slot machine) schedule

Day 1 - give food reward intermittently for 2 of each 3 responses

Day 2 - give food reward intermittently for 2 of each 4 responses

Day 3 - give food reward intermittently for 2 of each 5 responses

Work gradually until you can give a food reward intermittently for 2 of each 12 responses. If your dog loses enthusiasm, go back to a level where he responds eagerly and begin to progress again more slowly.

- **Continue rewarding each eager response with eye contact, and verbal praise. Do this as the dog responds to let it know it is doing what you want. (Do this throughout the life of the dog.)**

Phase II ends when the dog has learned to **reliably** respond to the visual stimulus of the closed hand and a verbal command, even though the pay-off (hand opens to offer food reward) is infrequent and unpredictable.

PHASE III (For as long as desired — usually a lifetime). In phase III, the dog is continuously rewarded with eye contact, verbal praise and affection for each and every eager response. But the hand is opened only intermittently to give a food reward, about twice per day. Variable ratio reinforcement with food creates a strong desire to please. It is easy to sneak some food into the hand about twice per day to maintain desired behaviors. This incentive program of offering food rewards two or three unpredictable times per day on a variable ratio schedule can maintain desirable eager to please behavior throughout a dog's lifetime.

- Stop carrying food on your body
- Stop having food in your closed hand, but do sneak a piece of food into the hand and open the hand to give a food reward about twice each day
- Continue to use the closed hand as an attractive object
- **Continue to give attention as a reward for each eager response**
- Feed dog with food in the bowl in the morning, if desired, as well as half-hour before bedtime. Reduce morning meal size to increase motivation as necessary.
- You may also increase the amount of free attention given, as long as the dog continues to respond eagerly. Reduce free attention if more motivation is desired.

ADDITIONAL IMPORTANT PRINCIPLES:

Since behavior is often place-specific, **practice commands should be given in every room in the house and in familiar outdoor places.** This helps your dog be eager-to-please you in every place in the house or outdoors. Too often practice commands are given in only one or two rooms or places. As a result dogs obey well in the practice

- 3) Appropriate timing is essential. It is important that your dog receives the food reward at the EXACT time that it performs the desired behavior. For example, to reward your dog for sitting on cue, the hand must open while the dog is still sitting. If the dog starts to stand up as you deliver the treat, it will be rewarded for standing up. If this happens, close your hand without delivering the reward, ask for the sit again, and reward quickly while the dog is in the 'sit'.
- 4) Dogs are much more visual than humans and most will respond more readily to slight changes in your body language than to verbal commands. This is one reason why the target hand is so effective. This is also the reason why it is less important that you talk or say the cue verbally. While it is good for the dog to learn to respond to both verbal and visual cues, the visual cues are usually more important to the dog and will override what you say. For this reason, let us know if you are having any trouble with these commands so that we can help you make sure that you are using the target hand consistently so that you make sense to the dog!
- 5) While you will want to pair the food reward with enthusiastic verbal praise, avoid petting your dog when it responds to the target hand. This can be confusing or distracting for the dog because it presents additional visual signals.

Step by Step Directions:

1. Carry food with you at all times over the next several months.
2. Practice 1-2 minutes at a time, 10+ times per day in every room of the house, and outside (use higher value treats).
3. You will teach the dog several distinct responses including *touch the hand, follow the hand, sit, lie down, come, stay, and watch the hand*. Your dog may already know many of the commands described. The advantage to re-teaching them using the target hand is that it builds the dog's focus on the hand as being a source of direction and rewards. The more the dog learns to depend on the hand for information, the easier it will be for the hand to be meaningful to the dog in times of distractions or stress.
4. Developing good handling skills takes time and coached practice. Proper timing is essential. Your dog can only respond as well as you are able to communicate. Please contact us if you need any help implementing these instructions.

Touch the Hand: Put a small food tidbit in your target hand. Your hand should be closed like a fist (fingers curled in) with palm pointing towards the dog. Keep your arm extended and slightly away from your body, and bend if necessary so that the hand is near the dog's nose level so you don't encourage the dog to jump. Call the dog, or encourage it to approach. The instant the dog touches its nose to your hand, open the hand and let it take the treat. Repeat this 5-10 times in each of the first few sessions until the dog is clearly looking for and focusing on the hand when presented as described. *Once the dog is responding reliably to the other commands described below, and earning food rewards for responding, you do not have to continue to practice this response. All other responses should be practiced regularly throughout the dog's life.*

Follow the Hand: Once the dog is clearly focused on the hand and willingly approaches it from a distance of several feet each time it is presented you are ready to teach 'follow the hand'. To do this, as the dog approaches the hand, move it slowly away from him and then stop it again so that he has to take a few steps to reach the hand. The instant the dog touches your stopped hand, open it and reward. Repeat this 3-5 times until he is solidly responding. Make this easy for the dog. Keep the hand only a few inches from the dog's nose at all times, so that he is never more than a step or two behind the hand at all times. You don't want to move the hand so quickly that he loses focus! Add additional steps gradually until the dog can remain focused and following the slowly moving hand as he walks around a room or

area, but not so well in other areas. (e.g. obey at obedience class, but not in real life situations.)

Since behavior is often time-specific, one-minute practice sessions should be given intermittently during each hour of the day that family members are home. This includes weekdays, weekend days and holidays. **A practice time of 15-30 minutes is NOT recommended because too often the dog learns to obey best during these practice sessions, and does not obey well at other times.** Learning proceeds best and dogs do not get bored when commands are taught in short periods several times during each hour that family members are home and awake. So plan multiple one-minute practice sessions per hour — not closer than 2-5 minutes apart.

The most important one-minute training session is the one that your dog needs right NOW to change the way it is responding in a given situation. Substitute a positive command (e.g. come, sit) for every correction. Use humane restraint to firmly, but in a friendly way, enforce compliance to any command you give. Then remember to reward! Dogs learn by what they do. Be sure yours is doing what you want!

Since behavior is often person-specific, all members of the family, except for infants and very young toddlers should participate in teaching. Dogs should learn to respond as eagerly to obey children as they do for adults. When dogs recognize children as leaders and the source of rewards for prompt obedience, many common problems are prevented. **Most children need adult supervision** to learn to properly give commands and rewards and to effectively use humane restraint. **Adults should supervise every interaction between young children and dogs — always.** Without supervision, it is very easy for the dog to learn the wrong thing, or a child to get hurt — even accidentally.