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Behavior Management – Working for Food

Why should I make my pet work for its food?

Most animals are genetically wired to spend a certain amount of time on activities that meet their requirements for survival. For most domestic pets, particularly dogs and cats, these requirements include opportunities to play, explore their environment, rest, socialize, acquire and eat food, and eliminate. Normally, opportunities for sexual activity and the ability to defend oneself from competitors or predators would also be survival requirements, but in the average family setting, these needs are not an issue.

Because food is one of the most basic necessities of life, each species must be programmed with or learn the appropriate skills in order to obtain food. To be successful, the animal must use a combination of genetics and observation of other members of their species to learn successful strategies for finding, catching and killing of live prey. Not only is food a motivating factor when the pet is hungry, but the acquisition of food is an activity that generally requires the expenditure of time and effort, and the use of both mental and physical skills.



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In order to provide our pets with an enriched and stimulating environment, we must meet their basic requirements. In addition to providing them with opportunities for social play and interaction, and allowing time for sleep and relaxation, we can use food as a critical and logical component of the daily enrichment process. In addition, food is one of the best means of motivating, training and shaping behaviors that you consider desirable in your pet.

Why should our pets work for food?

Food is a necessity of life and hunger is a primary motivator. Using food as a motivator is not only a way of ensuring positive social interactions with your pet, but is also a method for training and shaping those behaviors that you feel are desirable. In addition, each time the pet learns a new task that ends in the acquisition of food, your pet receives mental enrichment and stimulation and is, in effect, working for its food. Finally, working for its food is a natural behavior for any animal. Acquisition of food is an activity that generally requires the expenditure of time and effort and the use of both mental and physical skills.

How can I teach my cat to work for food?

A cat that was living in the wild would normally chase and successfully catch the equivalent of about 8 to 10 mice a day, as well as missing as many or more attempts when its prey escapes. If we can use food and play toys to encourage the cat to chase and eat 8 to 10 small portions of food a day, then we would mimic what would happen naturally in the wild. In practice, you can do this by having a few chase sessions a day with your cat, using feather or cardboard toys on a wire or string to simulate chasing. Since cats are most stimulated by novelty, using a few different toys for each session is advisable. At the end of each play session, give your cat a treat or a small amount of food.

Another way to provide enrichment and stimulation during feeding is to put small portions of the cat's food inside containers, balls or other feeding toys that the cat must actively manipulate in order to obtain the food. Using this method, the cat will need to work or hunt to get four or five small meals a day, rather than just eating food from a bowl. This type of feeding helps to provide mental and physical stimulation as well as an opportunity to chase and hunt.

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Cats that are free fed and live indoors are more likely to become obese. If instead you use one of these alternative methods of feeding, you can measure out the total amount of food required to meet the cat's daily energy needs (your veterinarian can help you determine your cat's daily caloric needs), and divide this amount of food between several different feeding toys or offer it over several meals. These portions can be placed or even hidden in different parts of the home, so the pet will need to search the house, or at least climb a few steps, to get to its food. This will reduce your cat's chance of becoming obese. At the very least, you can spread the meals out and feed several smaller meals per day by using a timed feeding dish. At the end of the day, if there is any food remaining from the amount required to meet your cats daily calorie needs, you can give this food some time before bedtime.

It is important that your cat continues to eat during the initial transition period, as even a day or two without food can be dangerous. Therefore, when feeding from toys or moving the food bowl, ensure that your cat continues to eat its food. If not, you may have to use different areas, different toys or make these changes more slowly.

How can I teach my dog to work for food?

Dogs, when left to their own devices, will either hunt or scavenge for food. If your dog is not a working dog (e.g., hunting, herding), then you can provide excellent alternatives to these activities through play activities such as retrieving, tug-of-war, flyball, or agility training.

You can give food treats to train and reinforce desirable behavior, as well as to encourage and reinforce proper play (e.g., retrieve and drop, tug-of-war and drop). When you are not actively playing with your dog or when it is time to leave your dog alone, you can use a variety of food exploration toys as one way to help keep it occupied and to encourage it to stay or play in its confinement area. These toys require your dog to manipulate them to get a food reward, providing the dog with opportunities to scavenge and explore and requiring it to expend mental and physical energy to accomplish these tasks. In contrast, if your dog gets all its food from a food bowl, it does not have to work or to use any energy to obtain the food.



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If you are going to teach your dog to work for some or all of its food, remember to determine how many calories your pet requires on a daily basis (you can get this information from your veterinarian), and make sure that you meet its requirement. Calculate how much you are giving as training rewards, how much you are putting in the feeding toys, and what is left to be put into the food bowl, without exceeding your pet's daily needs. Remember that, if you give unearned treats, you will give your dog "empty" calories without achieving any training and you may inadvertently reinforce undesirable behaviors, (e.g., barking, pawing, jumping up, begging).

What about dinner?

If you have been carefully and effectively utilizing and timing food and treats for training and as part of play, it may be advisable to save a portion of your dog's food for an evening meal, perhaps before, during or after the family's dinner and when all other food reward and treat training is complete for the day. At this meal, you can give the balance of any calories that your pet has not yet eaten for the day, which can be placed in a feeding toy or bowl. This may then help to stimulate a final evening elimination and a better night's sleep.

*This client information sheet is based on material written by: Debra Horwitz, DVM, DACVB & Gary Landsberg, DVM, DACVB, DECAWBM
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