



**J.D. Warford, DVM**

<http://www.dcmetrovet.com>

**240.460.9642**

## **LEARN TO EARN PROGRAM**

### ***What is learn to earn?***

Over the years, a number of useful “catch phrases” have been used to help describe to pet owners the importance of taking control of their pet and the environment. One of the best ways to do this is by control of rewards so that they are used exclusively to reinforce desirable behaviors. For example, food and treats, affection and attention, access to the outdoors, play and walks can be powerful reinforcers as long as the owner stops using these rewards for all behaviors except those that are the focus of training. Learn to earn, which was introduced as a dog training concept by William Campbell in the early 70’s, is a simple catch phrase which perhaps best captures the concept that when something positive is given to the pet, he can learn that the behavior is desirable to repeat. Therefore it is essential that the rewards are given for the behaviors we want and not those that we do not want. In addition, by withholding rewards at all other times, it can be insured that the motivational value of the rewards remains high and that undesirable behaviors are not reinforced. Another catch phrase “no casual interactions” by Andrew Luescher helps to remind owners of this concept, all attention is earned through responses to commands and the reward is the attention or access to something the pet desires. Dr. Karen Overall uses the term “deference training” to focus on the idea that the goal is to have the pet learn to defer to the owner for each reward. Deference can be sitting and waiting quietly until the item is given. Not only does the pet become more settled and relaxed, but it becomes clear to the pet which behaviors will earn rewards (predictability) An alternative catch phrase that similarly reminds the owner that each reward should only be given for learning and training what is desired is Nothing in life is free a term coined by Dr. Victoria Voith . Reinforcing what we want in our pets rather than punishing what we don’t want is the focus of an excellent guide to reward based training “Don’t Shoot the Dog”, by Karen Pryor.



### ***Can learn to earn be used to correct behavior problems?***

This program is a very useful way to restructure your relationship. It is important that dogs should be taught the social boundaries of their

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environment and the fact that you are in control at all times. Control should be benign and non-confrontational. It is done by controlling what the dog has and what the dog gets. Equally important is that the pet understands what behaviors are desirable and what behaviors earn rewards. By providing rewards only for those behaviors that are desired, increasingly more accurate responses can be reinforced, and reinforcement of inappropriate behavior (e.g. attention seeking, play biting, jumping up) will cease. Rewards can be affection, attention, praise, food, treats, play, toys, etc. Choose the behaviors that you wish to reinforce and make it clear to your pet that these rewards have to be earned. In fact, the first step in resolving many behavior problems will be to cease all casual interactions with the pet. In this way each and every one of the pet's rewards can be given to reinforce the desirable behavior, and to improve response to commands.

### ***What happens if a problem arises?***

Establishing a routine from the outset is important for dogs, so they know what is required of them and where the boundaries are. Without this they can become anxious and develop a range of problems. If the dog becomes disobedient, withdraw any reward normally given on completion of the exercise; this places you, the owner, in control. Ensure that the dog learns that the reward will only be reinstated once the task is completed satisfactorily. The dog must learn what behavior is needed to get the reward.

Rewards must be appropriate. For example food treats are often used as training rewards and are clearly less effective if used immediately after a meal. Similarly playing with toys will not be effective if the dog is continuously surrounded with toys. Therefore it is important if any form of behavior modification or re-training program has to be put in place that rewards are chosen with care and then withdrawn until the particular task is successfully completed. This will soon make it clear that the dog is not in control of these resources and will provide you with an opportunity to teach the dog what behaviors will be reinforced. Rewards can also be access to things the dog desires such as going outdoors or coming inside. Prior to receiving these items, the dog is asked to perform a simple task such as "sit" and the reward is only given if the dog complies.

### ***How do we start?***

This obviously depends on the problem behaviour. Start in a safe and non-distracting environment and the chosen reward is given for compliance. For example the dog is always asked to sit before he is petted, but if he does not sit, no attention is given. Once a reliable response is established from the dog practice the commands in a variety of environments and with all family members, or even strangers if appropriate for the particular problem.

### ***Staying in control***

It is paramount that you are in control at all times. Do this via the chosen reward for which the dog craves. Ensure that the reward is always earned. With a simple training procedure this usually means that before the reward is given the dog is asked to come, sit, stay, etc. Ensure the task has been successfully accomplished. Then reward!

Any training procedure should be broken down into simple components. For example, if you are training your dog to come to you and sit at your side, start by recalling your dog and rewarding as soon as he comes to you. Once this component has been reliably established get him to come but put him into the sit position before the reward is offered. With these exercises the dog soon learns that you are in charge.

### ***What happens if my dog learns to anticipate the routine?***

Change it! Some dogs rapidly learn to anticipate your routine. If that occurs, change the procedure. For example many owners ask their dog to sit before being fed. If your dog starts to sit before the command has been given, change the routine. Request the dog to

either lie, or to stand. With repetition of these exercises your dog will soon learn that you are in charge and will look to you for instruction when uncertain rather than to take control in these situations. This is important since many dogs become anxious when uncertain and may attempt to use aggressive behaviours to take control. This is something that should not be tolerated, but should not be confronted with force.

***What happens if my dog refuses to obey my commands?***

Avoid confrontation or a situation that might lead to aggression or where you may not be able to maintain control. Terminate the exercise. Remember every time your dog fails to comply it reinforces his control, not yours. In other words, if you ask the dog to sit prior to opening the door, but the dog does not comply the door is not opened and you walk away.

***How do I regain control?***

A long lead and head collar is useful and can be used both outside when on walks and also in the home. Each time the dog is given a command that is not obeyed, use the lead and collar to achieve the desired response. Once achieved, reward the dog.

Repetition is important. Continue until the dog responds to verbal controls only without the need for the lead and collar control.

Depending upon the problem you will often find that continuous reinforcement is needed. Once the desired response is achieved switch to a program of variable and intermittent reinforcement. Sometimes the dog slips back and you may find you have to use the lead and collar and more frequent reinforcement.

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*This client information sheet is based on material written by Debra Horwitz, DVM, Diplomate ACVB & Gary Landsberg, DVM, Diplomate ACVB  
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