

Luring - the good and the bad.

By Alexandra Santos

Out of the four most prominent training techniques that dog-friendly trainers use, luring is the most popular one, and yet, the one that I like the least. This is because while it is easier for an inexperienced owner or novice trainer to use this technique, it is just as easy to make training errors that need to be corrected later on. So much so, that the overuse of luring is responsible for inadvertently training dogs to do nothing unless they see food. It is also because luring has become so popular and is the most talked about technique in many training books, that we often hear the all too common statement "dog-friendly training methods are all about food". This is simply not true! Dog-friendly training is about setting the dog up for success and providing positive reinforcement, be it in the form of food, play, touch, verbal praise, or engaging in an activity that the dog enjoys. Food is often used mainly because we can get more trials done during training, without losing momentum.

What luring is.

Part of setting the dog up to succeed in anything that you are training him to do, is having a plan that will guide you in taking your dog from A to B to C and so forth. In other words, your training and communication with your dog will be much more effective if you break the task down into small and manageable increments. This is especially important if you have an insecure dog that gives up easily - the task is too difficult, the dog stops trying. During the process of training you may use aids such as: showing your dog his favorite toy to encourage him to come to you when called; walking with him on leash next to a

wall so that he doesn't detour to the side; holding a piece of food in front of his nose and moving it towards the base of his tail so that he sits; making a swooping movement with your arm over an agility obstacle to encourage your dog to jump over it. All these aids are called prompts, because they prompt or encourage your dog to do what you want him to.

Luring is a specific type of prompting, where you use a piece of food to guide your dog into positioning himself in the way that you want him to. A few examples of luring are: carrying a piece of food next to your leg and in front of your dog's nose so that he walks next to you; showing your dog a piece of food and moving slightly away from him so that he is encouraged to come to you; holding a piece of food in front of your dog's nose and then moving it up towards your face to encourage eye contact. You can actually think of a lure - piece of food, if you prefer - as a magnet between your hand and your dog that gets him to perform the behaviors that you want.

Its advantages.

An experienced trainer can easily handle a leash, a clicker, food treats, a toy, and the dog himself, and still have excellent observational skills and timing, all at the same time and without any coordination problems. You, on the other hand, may find the whole experience overwhelming, especially if you're new or inexperienced with training. This is nothing to be ashamed of! It is simply a fact! Training your dog, becoming savvy at handling all the training equipment, and having great observational skills and timing is a skill that requires a lot of practice. I assure you that if somebody asked me to do a hip-hop dance, I would be so overwhelmed that I most probably wouldn't be able to tell my left arm from my right leg!

If I put a clicker in your hand or if you had chosen to rather use a verbal marker, and I suggested we got on with

training your dog, which of these two scenarios would you feel more comfortable with? First scenario: you must put your full attention into observing your dog and as soon as he offers the slightest approximation to the behavior that you want, mark it and reinforce. Now make sure to mark and reinforce every performance of that behavior. Okay, now we're going to raise our criteria by withholding the click or verbal marker, because we want the dog to offer a closer approximation to the sit. This, by the way, is a technique called free shaping. Second scenario: hold a piece of food in your hand and slowly start moving it from just above your dog's nose back towards the base of his tail. Watch as he starts lowering his hind quarters, and as soon as his rear end touches the floor, click your clicker or say your verbal marker and give him the piece of food. I bet you will feel a lot more comfortable with the second scenario. Why? Because it is easier for you! You just have to make the behavior happen, mark and reinforce it as soon as it does happen! This is one of the advantages of luring - it is easy to do!

Besides being easy for you to use, luring initially gets faster results in the sense that it "jumpstarts" the dog. Let us imagine that your dog was initially trained with coercion and, as a result thereof, doesn't offer many different behaviors. In scientific terms we call this a dog with low behavioral variability. If he doesn't offer a broad spectrum of behaviors, you may easily have very little or nothing to build from, which means that you have to make the behaviors happen by using luring. Even if your dog is the most self-confident dog on earth and offers you all kinds of behaviors, he may not offer the specific behavior that you want often enough for you to establish a strong history of reinforcement for that behavior. In other words, the more often your dog sits within a period of 5 minutes, for example, the quicker he will learn the sit ---» reinforcer contingency; the less often he sits within that time period, the longer it will take for him to learn that contingency. In this sense, luring is beneficial during the acquisition stage of a behavior. By acquisition, I mean

the stage of learning where your dog is still learning that a certain behavior leads to reinforcement.

Besides luring being easy for you to use and initially getting faster results, you also worry less about breaking the task down into small and manageable increments, because in a vast majority of cases you can lure the dog in one smooth movement. It is a fact that your dog may not be lured into the sit right away and may back away, or jump up to get to the food treat; even if this happens, he will get the hang of it after a few repetitions.

Its fallouts

Although luring has its advantages, it also has many fallouts, especially concerning training errors! Let us look at some of those fallouts or disadvantages.

Food is a very powerful reinforcer. When used both as a lure and as reinforcement, which is often the case, food may become the reinforcer for a behavior that you actually don't want! For example, so called stubbornness can be inadvertently trained in this way. Let us look at the following scenario, and provided that you have used luring to train your dog to come when called: you say "come" and your dog looks at you but doesn't come; you repeat your verbal cue and he still doesn't come; you repeat it again, this time accompanied by all types of encouraging sounds and movements, and he still doesn't come; now you call him, coax him over to you and bring out your food treat and he comes running. From your point of view, you finally managed to get your dog to come to you. From his point of view, not coming was reinforced with a food treat. Think about it! If you use food as a reinforcer, if your dog does not respond to the "come" cue and you present him with a piece of food, you will have reinforced not coming to you! Over time, your dog will "become stubborn", because he will learn that not coming when called leads to reinforcement.

In a not so bad scenario, where you don't get far enough to inadvertently train stubbornness, you can still accidentally reinforce slow responses. When you give your dog a verbal cue, you expect him to respond to it. If he doesn't, you make the behavior happen by using a food lure. Once again, from your point of view you are luring your dog into responding faster. From his point of view, you are reinforcing slow responses. In short, failure to respond to a cue means that your dog is waiting for the food which, according to you is a lure, but according to him is a reinforcer.

Another point to consider is that the food lure needs to be faded out as soon as possible during the training process, otherwise you run the risk of your dog not performing the behavior unless food is in sight. As a consequence, food becomes the cue for him to perform a behavior; not your hand or verbal signal. Preferably, it should be faded out as soon as your dog is performing the behavior that you want with one smooth movement of your hand. But in reality, many people use food lures for much too long, and then don't know how to get out of the "he only works if he knows that I have food" trap. I'm sure you've already seen what I'm about to describe either in your own dog or someone else's: "sit" ---» nothing happens ---» "sit" ---» nothing happens ---» "sit" accompanied by your hand signal ---» nothing happens ---» "sit" in a louder tone accompanied by a more salient hand signal ---» nothing happens ---» the food treat comes out of your pocket ---» the dog sits. In this scenario, what exactly is the cue for the dog to sit? The food treat! He sat when he saw the food and responded to nothing else, so what else could possibly be the cue for him to sit? So now you are in a trap, because your dog needs to learn a different cue for sitting. Although you intended for him to learn a verbal cue or hand signal, inadvertently you taught him that food was the cue for sitting! Furthermore, by bringing out the food treat when all else failed, you reinforced not sitting. In fact, "sit" can easily come to mean "carry on doing whatever you're doing".

To summarize, luring certainly has its place in dog-friendly training methods, but its disadvantages can impact negatively on your training, especially if you make the mistake of not fading out the lure early enough.

REFERENCES

Burch, M. and Bailey, J. 1999. *How Dogs Learn*. New York: Howell Book House.

Pryor, K. 1985. *Don't Shoot the Dog*. New York: Bantam Books

Reid, P. 1996. *Excel-erated Learning*. Berkeley: James & Kenneth Publishers

Sdao, Kathy (2005). *Advanced Clicker Training*. Tawzer Dog Videos