

# Motivation Dos and Don'ts

By Rachel Sanders  
Photos by Karen Hocker

The concept of playing with toys and frequently rewarding behaviors to increase drive and motivation is not new to agility handlers. Still, the practical application of this concept is often not so easy when attempting to increase motivation. To address the problem let's consider three major topics: handler interaction, reinforcement, and handler habits.



## Handler Interaction

Handler interaction is what you do to reward the dog and includes the dog's reaction to that reinforcement. My analogy for the reactions some of our dogs give us during our attempts to reward and play with them follows (my apologies to all grandmothers out there).

Remember when you were a child and it was time for one of those family visits? You pulled up to your grandmother's house with a slight feeling of dread, and as you walked to the front door, you saw the shadow of your grandmother approaching. You winced wishing, just for once, she wouldn't give you that sloppy kiss on the cheek and remark on how much bigger you had grown!

In contrast, do you remember the excitement and anticipation of a trip to the zoo, to a theme park, or to a friend's party?

When we attempt to motivate our dogs, we unintentionally tend to send our dogs to "grandmother's house" and not to the "friend's party." When playing with and rewarding your dog, take notice of his demeanor and ask yourself: is he at his grandmother's or at a party? Are his ears perky, his tail wagging, and is he moving around you in an excited manner or is he standing still, recoiling away with ears and tail down? Change your behavior to a party and you will get a more excited and energized agility partner.



Motivating many dogs is not as simple as revving them up at the start of an exercise and tossing a toy or dispensing a treat at the end. Motivation is much more about building a partnership of fun, while you laugh at the goofs and participate in the reinforcement. It takes effort and genuine pleasure on our part to excite the dog about agility and turn a lackluster dog into an exuberant one.

Picture this scene: The dog arrives at the training field and is placed into a down-stay, while the handler walks the exercise. The dog may move a couple of times during the walk-through and the handler must leave the walk-through to place the dog back in a down-stay. Once the walk-through is complete and questions on handling are answered, the handler releases the dog from his stay and brings him out to the start of the exercise. He may have been played

with briefly but most often, the toy or treat is wafted in front of the dog's face and he views it without much interest. The dog then is asked to sit. The handler leads out and releases the dog, wondering why the dog doesn't spontaneously combust into the fast and furious speed demon she wished she had when they walked onto the course.

During the exercise, the dog may or may not pick up speed and as he completes the last obstacle in the sequence, a toy is tossed for him while the handler turns to me and says, "See what I mean? He's just not fast enough." Or the dog completes the last obstacle and stands looking expectantly at his owner. The handler gives him a treat and tells him he's a good boy. Perhaps I have exaggerated to make a point—perhaps not!

# Reinforcement

Now imagine this alternative: The dog arrives at the training field and is either tethered or put into his crate. The owner walks the exercise without distraction, asking any necessary handling questions. When done, she is ready for the dog. She asks the dog to sit and either unties the dog or opens the crate. On a release cue the dog breaks from the sit position and is rewarded with a game of tug, followed by a couple of tricks, such as left or right spins, walk back, or rollover; these tricks are again reinforced with a game of tug.

The dog and handler tug to the start of the exercise. The dog is asked to sit and the handler leads out and starts the exercise. At the end of the sequence, the handler calls the dog and engages in a brief game, allowing the dog to jump up, patting the dog's sides and the like. The handler then produces a toy or treat, continuing the play and perhaps asking for additional tricks during the game.



What are the key points in the second scenario to note?

- If you crate or tie your dog when he is waiting his turn, you won't be distracted during your walk-through and you won't need to nag your dog about not staying in place.
- Asking for some behaviors before starting the exercise gives you an opportunity to reward your dog and helps to get the dog into working mode before you introduce him to agility equipment.
- Celebrating with your dog at the end of the exercise before producing the toy or treat achieves a couple of things. It simulates the delay between finishing a course in competition and getting out of the ring to your toys and treats. The party makes *you* the initial reinforcement and focus for the dog, and the toys

and treats are an enhancement to your interaction. With this brief interaction you have made yourself and the act of playing the reinforcement for your dog, rather than your being just a toy or food dispenser. Remember, it is often the act of playing with your dog that is more reinforcing than just the toy by itself.

- By continuing the game long after the agility exercise is finished and by adding some additional behaviors into the celebration, you are building the rate of reinforcement for your dog and therefore increasing your dog's willingness to work.





# Handler Habits

Making a mistake should be seen as a learning opportunity. Unfortunately our response to mistakes often creates anxiety in our dogs. There are several habits that we as trainers routinely display, albeit unintentionally, during training sessions that can cause our dogs to become less motivated. Following are some suggestions for better choices that will help increase your dog's motivation.



Habit that De-motivates	Alternative for Increasing Motivation
You are late with a turning cue and your dog spins or goes off course. You know it was your fault and you groan at your blunder. Does your dog know you're not groaning at him?	Call your dog to you, ask for another behavior, and reward your dog with a toy or treat. For dogs that require more motivation, I like to use behaviors that allow motion such as a hand touch or spin rather than asking for a sit.
You use "Whoops" as a no reward marker during your dog's training, but you also often use it unconsciously when you make a mistake. How does your dog know you weren't addressing him?	If you need to use a no reward marker, use a phrase that you are unlikely to say in reference to yourself. For example, say "Try again" so that if you do use "Whoops" to comment on yourself your dog has no understanding of the word.
Your dog makes a mistake, perhaps going off course, and you don't know why. You stop, turn your back on your dog, and ask your instructor what you did to cause the off-course. Your dog, however, is receiving a form of punishment with a time-out. Often dogs start to sniff and wander off.	You need to take care of your dog first. Yet you don't want to reward the dog for driving through the tunnel when he should have taken the jump, even if you know it was somehow your fault. Rewards should only be given if both your behavior and the dog's were correct. Do not give what is commonly referred to as a "screw-up cookie" if the dog followed your handling but your handling was incorrect. Often the next time you attempt the sequence with correct handling, the dog will ignore you and go through the tunnel again since that got a reward last time. Ask for an alternative behavior (spin, hand touch, sit) and give the screw-up cookie for that correct response. Now both of you are correct and the dog's rate of reinforcement is at a high enough level to keep him working with you.
In response to an error, you stop but your dog continues to attempt obstacles, and you let him go on autopilot. Often the dog is just going through the motions, attempting equipment to elicit some sort of response from you. Perhaps in the past you have reinforced the dog in some way. For example, when on autopilot, the dog attempts a piece of contact equipment and you either give the dog his cue for a two-on/two-off position or praise the dog for voluntarily stopping. By doing this, you are inadvertently reinforcing a dog for working without you; and perhaps more important, reinforcing the dog for not working with any speed or enthusiasm. In fact the dog is often tentative in his performance.	Get the dog back to you as quickly as possible, regroup, and then continue on together. If a novice dog skips an obstacle but is still on course and has taken the next obstacle in the sequence, it causes more damage to stop and redo. You may be better off to continue. You can fix the problem next time and remember to stop and reward when the dog completes the obstacle he skipped



### Habit that De-motivates

When a handling mistake happens, you go back and try again with a sloppy restart, leading to the dog's making yet another error. Sometimes you don't restart the dog on the same side he was on when things went awry.

You make an error in a sequence. You restart the sequence several times only to keep making a mistake in the same place. The dog's rate of reinforcement has dropped and the dog is not learning what you want.

You take a long time to get back to your restart position. This can give your dog time to wander around, sniff, and become more interested in his environment than in you.

### Alternative for Increasing Motivation

Take time to ensure a smooth and correct restart when redoing part of an exercise. Be certain you're setting up to work on the skill that you're attempting to train. Part of this involves backing up a step: instead of just restarting and stuffing the dog into the tunnel end that he missed, go back an obstacle or two and approach the tunnel so that you are incorporating the original challenge of the exercise. Also ask yourself two questions before attempting a restart: Is my dog still motivated? Will my dog learn anything?

Suppose your dog faults a tunnel/A-frame discrimination. If you are especially aware that your handling could have been clearer, you may attempt the discrimination a second time. However, if the dog chooses the wrong obstacle for a second time, you might need to make the challenge easier for the dog. Perhaps you could start again with one obstacle before the discrimination, and the dog may be able to offer the correct response by reducing his speed.

Run to your restart position; make it fun for your dog to have a "do over."



If you believe the adage, "It's always the handler's fault, never the dog's," your actions should support that belief. Create new habits in your training to avoid these de-motivating behaviors and you'll find your dog is more excited at the end of a training session than he was at the beginning. 🐾

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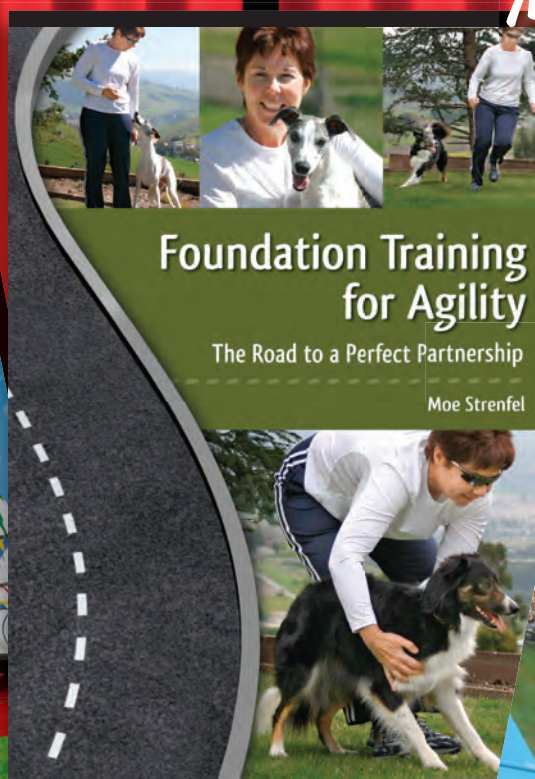




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