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Catherine Phoenix Hallam
Hallam's Happy Hounds Behaviour and Training
MSc. Hons. AABT., BSc Hons., PGCE, PGD, IMDT (Dist), IOSH:
Tel # 07813621947
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Proofing a behaviour

There are many times that I have asked someone who I am working with to help their dog, and I find that when I say "Ask your dog for a sit", they answer "My dog only sits inside".

Basically, this means that the behaviour has not been proofed, nor has it been placed on a variable schedule of reinforcement.

Hold on, what does that mean?

Well the dog may sit, with your back to the patio doors, with her doing the behaviour in front of the TV stand. Yep, a sit every time. However when you take the same dog and place it in the hall and ask for a sit before going out, that 'behaviour picture' has not been done here sufficiently enough so that the dog understands 'sit' means 'sit' where ever I ask you to, regardless of what the background picture looks like.

So simple steps to proofing, is to gain a sit behaviour in different places in your home, using different hands, or types of reinforcement techniques (see Reinforcement Delivery information) and then out in the garden, by your front step before going on a walk, before jumping in the car etc.

Once you have proofed the behaviour using a 'continuous reinforcement schedule', dog trainer speak for giving the dog a treat for every 'ask' of a behaviour. You then move to the variable schedule.

How does this work for a dog?

Well, a dog gets a hit from the dopamine system – the feel-good factor – every time it gets a reward. This encourages the dog to continue doing what it was doing to reinforce that 'hit'. Now apply that in the way that a penny slot machine user is 'hoping' for that 'hit' but continues to feed it (the behaviour of the sit) the pennies, in order for the pay-out (the dog gets a treat).

So how does that work?

Quite simply once you have faded the lure behaviour (hand signal) to just using a cue of 'sit' and they sit as they understand that – cue ~ "sit" means "dog bottom on floor" gets treat, then you can move onto the variable schedule of 'treat delivery'.

This means that at first I may again start with a cue sit, dog sits, reward first 2, that's 1:1 ratio. Then I go to sit, a good and a pet, to the second sit, gets the tidbit. Then I go to every 3rd sit. The trick is to alternate so that the dog cannot predict when that treat is going to wing its way from your treat pouch or pocket into their mouth.

So it may look like....1, 2, 1, 3, 2, 1, 1, 3, 5, 3, 2, 4, 5, 6.

For loose lead walking this keeps the dog on task for the magic step that may deliver a food morsel or a play toy – whatever is your dog's preferred reward.