

ACADEMY OF CANINE BEHAVIOR

NO FREE LUNCHES

- 1. Anything we get in EXCESS, regardless of how much we like it, loses value over a period of time.** If you really like ice cream and indulge in a bowl daily, you might look forward to that as your special treat each day. But if you ate ice cream for breakfast, lunch and dinner and all your snacks, at some point you would not consider ice cream to be very special.
- 2. Anything we have ACCESS to anytime we want it, loses its value as a reward.** When you go to work, you know that at the end of the pay period you will receive money for the time and energy you spent working: your paycheck. You could say that money is your reward for working. But, if you could go out into your backyard and pick money off of a money tree anytime you wanted, how long do you think you would continue to work for your paycheck?

The two concepts above become very important to anyone who is trying to resolve a behavior problem with a dog: the concepts of *excess* and *access*. These concepts are not only applicable to humans, but also apply to dogs. The big difference between the two lies in what is perceived as *valuable* and what is perceived as a *reward*, both of which are critical in altering dog behavior.

WHAT IS "VALUABLE" TO A DOG? A dog is much like a 2 year old child in his perception of value. Abstract concepts have no meaning. For instance, if you asked your dog to do something for you such as "sit" and offer him a \$5 bill if he'll do it, he will not perceive any value in that piece of paper in your hand. Money is a very abstract concept. As you get older you realize that you can exchange money for other things of value to you such as food. ***But a dog, like a two year old child, only puts value on the moment and only if they perceive the need at that moment.*** If they are hungry or if the food being offered is thought of as a special treat, it has value. But again, if they have just had two or three hamburgers and are full, the juiciest hamburger has no value.

PETTING AND ATTENTION: One thing that most dogs value is *physical contact with their owners* or anyone that they care about. This contact is often in the form of "petting." It can also be in other forms such as leaning on, jumping on, mouthing, or their bodies touching our bodies. Many dogs also value other types of *attention from their owners* such as eye contact and verbal interaction. But, if your dog *controls* these types of interactions, their value is going to be diminished.

Example: You are sitting on the couch and the dog comes up to you. Without even thinking about it, you reach down and pet the dog. You may even talk to him.

YOUR POINT OF VIEW: Let's face it, petting is one of the things you like about having a dog. Touching a warm furry body and interacting with animals feels good both physically and psychologically.

THE DOG'S POINT OF VIEW: The dog has come up to you and asked to be petted. You comply. The dog has just controlled the interaction. Chances are good that he will also control when the petting stops by simply moving away.

What could possibly be wrong with this innocent interaction with your dog? Nothing, provided you are not having any major behavior problems. But if you are, you need to look at this "innocent interaction" from the dog's point of view. If the dog can have access to petting by simply presenting himself to you, what reward value does petting retain? None! Of course, one incident is not a problem. But if you start paying attention to how many times a day the dog does control the situation, a pattern may emerge.

THE "NO FREE LUNCH" PROGRAM: ***This program means the dog must earn the attention it gets.*** Instead of diminishing the value of contact with your dog, you are going to increase its reward value. If the dog presents itself for petting, ask him to do something for you first. That something may just be to "sit." As soon as the dog does a sit you can pet him. But now it is *your* idea, and not his. It is helpful to also keep the petting to a brief interaction. Make sure the dog understands you are also controlling the amount of attention and duration of petting. In other words, keep the value of the petting high by doling it out in small quantities instead of flooding the dog with petting. Give him a stroke or two and quit. If he wants more, again, ask him to do something for you before you resume petting him. **KEEP CONTROL!**