



IT'S YOUR CHOICE: THE GAME OF SELF CONTROL

Why teach your dog It's Your Choice?

This game is about controlling the *consequences* of the dog's choice rather than trying to control the *dog*. We start small and teach the dog she or he always has a choice. If she or he chooses correctly when working with you, good consequences will follow (the chance for reinforcement). If the dog makes an inappropriate choice, the consequences will be clear and not reinforcing.

But the consequences will never be a function of you trying to coach or intimidating the dog in any way. In the end we teach the dog *self* control rather than *imposed* control. A dog with self control has learned to have impulse control when in stimulating environments. Rather than leave you to chase the squirrel, steal a toy, or investigate every crumb that may be on the ground, the dog will play your game knowing rewards will be earned contingent upon following your rules.

The *It's Your Choice* game starts out teaching your dog to make easy decisions when faced with a chance to steal rewards. Building upon successes, you can grow this game into any form of distraction training you can imagine. Eventually your dog's impulse control becomes so brilliant, you can trust her or him unsupervised with a roast on the kitchen counter within reach. The dog will learn to *want* to make the right choice. This is self control and does not require your eagle eye scouting every training horizon for distractions that may cause your dog to leave you in search of alternate rewards.

It's Your Choice is great for teaching your dog to make good decisions when there are things he wants, like appetizers set out on your coffee table or a baby's toys or diaper, or things that are downright dangerous, like chicken bones left on the street or in the trash. Choosing correctly earns the dog the reinforcement and teaches a strong foundation for self control. The dog learns to control himself. If an incorrect choice is made we control the reinforcement (not the dog); we prevent access to the reinforcement if the dog makes an incorrect choice.

How to train it.

Step 1. Place some treats in your hand and show it to your dog but don't let him get it. While seated rest your arm on your knee. Close your hand and make a fist. Hold your fist at your dog's nose level and remember not to move it. Remember it's his choice, so we allow the dog to do whatever he chooses. Ignore any sniffing and pawing. So offer nothing, say nothing, do nothing. The dog has not demonstrated self control. With a really food driven dog, this may take a few minutes or longer, so be patient.

Make certain not to move your hand as that turns the game into one of chase-the-moving-prey. Your dog will be even keener to hunt it down, rather than back away. If every undesirable response from your dog is met with a non-response from you he will eventually back away from the hand. When he does (providing that he is not barking at you) open your hand. By doing this you have reinforced the first appropriate choice your dog has made.



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Can you predict your dog's response to this open handful of cookies? Of course! He will see the treats and try to get them. Your response is to simply close your fist around the treats once more.

Step 2. The consequences of the dog's behavior (you controlling his access to the good cookies) will eventually cause him to choose a different response. But it will be HIS choice of responses, which demonstrates self control. You are only controlling the consequences and the dog is controlling his impulses. Keep this game of opening and closing your hand going until your dog will not move towards the food when he sees it in your open hand.

Now verbally praise your dog. When you do (this will be the first time you have spoken during the game), he may move forward as praise is a predictor of a reward. Close the fist. Only when your dog can demonstrate great self control (he stays away from the open hand) should you pick up a treat to reward him.

HOWEVER, if when you touch a treat, he moves to get it from you ... you know the drill. Put the cookie back into your fist and close it once more. Your dog should only get a treat if you can praise him, pick up a treat, and move it towards him. Only then should you reinforce his self control. Many people, when playing this game, look for an excuse to feed their dog. A better approach is to observe the dog and search for a response to reward. The consequences of the game are teaching the dog to have self control.

Step 3. Adding difficulty. Place the treat (or a pile of treats) on the floor and make sure your dog knows it's there. Stand or kneel close to the treat with your foot or hand ready to lightly cover it if your dog decides to try to take it. Don't hover; give your dog a chance to make a decision. If your dog moves away from the treat, click and hand the treat, or a different treat, to your dog. Repeat until your dog is readily moving away from the exposed treat.

Step 5. Work in different environments and add distractions. Then add distance. You may need another person to help protect the treats if you are far from them. Try placing something distracting on the floor between you and your dog and call your dog to you. Your dog comes to you and ignores the treat or toy? Success!

Training Tip:

Be aware of what your dog is doing when you reinforce him. What position is he in? You want your dog to back away from you, but you don't want the dog to think his reinforcement is tied to one body position or movement. Make sure your dog is rewarded in a sit, down or stand randomly and don't open your hand when he is still moving (or you will be building in a "back up" into the game).