

Help For Dogs Refusing Treats: Case Study With Training Plan

Speaker Key

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Transcript

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SG Every once in a while, we get a note from a listener saying, "My dog won't take food outside. And so, I don't know how I'll work on things like loose leash walking, or [reactivity](#) when he just won't take food." I thought it's not really that common of a problem. However, we could turn it into a case study and make it super interesting for everybody. So that's what we're doing today.

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Hi everybody, I'm Susan Garrett. Welcome to Shaped by Dog. The more people I ask, the more I realize this problem actually is more common than you would think. That dogs just [don't take food](#) and people will say, "Oh, that's easy. Let's just train with a toy." Well, that gets cumbersome. And if you're working on reactivity, it may or may not be a great idea to get that dog super aroused with a toy.

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Food is really the number one thing you should be considering when you're working with your dog when you're trying to overcome anything, or building new behaviors, it's just so darn easy. Boom, in their mouth, gone. It's so much easier if a dog loves food. So, why would a dog not like food? And why would a dog not want to take food? Outside in particular. It could be a number of things. Now, first off it could be the dog's health.

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They may be sick, or they may be in pain. It may even be low grade, like a GI problem that may not be you know, just an ongoing thing. But you really want to rule that out before you go too deep into the weeds of training. Now it could also be a habit, that unfortunately the habit gets conditioned over and over again.

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I see this in sports, I see this all over. When a dog gets worried and they stop like taking food or they won't do anything, the owners start saying things like "It's okay. Atta boy, come on, come on, come on, come on. You can do it. You can do it. You can do it." All these words. Now, I'm not saying we are reinforcing the dog by saying those words, but what we are doing is potentially building a trigger that I hear these words and it triggers an emotional state for the dog.

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And so, it could be a habit. And the first thing I'm going to suggest you do, is examine your own behaviors. And if there are words that you've been using when your dog won't take food, trying to get them to take food, you might want to stop. And if they're really good words, like things that are trying to excite the dog, "Whoa! What is it?" and normally that will excite the dog, but it's not working outside. You can come back to it and we're going to get it working for you, but just hold off for now.

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So, we've ruled out pain. We've ruled out the dog's sick. We've ruled out that it is a habit. It's now all about value. Let's say you take a dog out to a bunny farm, and you've got kibble as your reinforcement.



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The dog is highly unlikely going to take that kibble because they want to see the bunnies, they want to chase the bunnies, they're so excited. And that's probably what every other dog trainer has told you. Get a bigger meatball. Get something that's more valuable. So, I'm sure you've heard people say get higher value food and you just want to pull out your hair: "There is no high value food that my dog will take when I'm outside!"

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So, what happens is, food that may work in the house suddenly lowers in value outside. It could be the dog is afraid. It could be the dog is over excited. And so, it doesn't really matter the reason, but what we've got to do is bump the value up when the dog's outside. Okay, you're probably going, "Yeah Susan, you've got an amazing grasp of the obvious there, Einstein." And that's what I'm going to share with you, how you're going to do it.

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We've got to be diagnosticians first of all. And so, what I want you to do is I want you to make a list of 10 reinforcers that your dog will take, or that your dog should take. If your dog just won't eat food anywhere, then we've got to look at experience. So, number one, let's rule out if [your dog is free choice fed](#), meaning you put their food down and you leave it there for the day, you've got to stop that behavior. Because you're teaching the dog to ignore food, right? "Oh, it's there. I can come back anytime I want."

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If there were chocolate chip cookies all around me 24 hours a day— okay that might be a really bad example. Okay, if there was food everywhere, you might lose your appetite for that food. And a lot of times that happens when dogs are free choice fed. So, feeding your dog is an event. You present them with food, you give them a period of time, five minutes, whatever they don't need in five minutes you take it away. It's done.

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If you are offering your dog food all the time, it should go down twice a day. They eat what they want and then you take it away. Because we want it to be an event. Now, if your dog is overweight, you should be able to see your dog's last two ribs. Again, if they have a big heavy coat maybe, but so many people tell me, "Oh, my dog is just fluffy." No, you can feel the skin and you can roll it. Then there's like fat under there. Guys, that's another reason why your dog may not be that hungry.

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So free choice foods got to go. Get your dog into a healthy weight. And the other thing is, the random treats that you give your dog throughout the day, we're going to just put a curb on those. You're still going to be able to give them, but we're going to turn them into an event for you.

So the first thing you're going to do is you're going to make a list of 10 reinforcements. So, ask your friends, put comments, come on over to YouTube, put your list over here so that other people can read your list.

From things that are just okay, like dry, if you're feeding kibble, kibble might be something that is, "Yeah, that's okay." Or any kind of a dry store-bought treat that's just boring you know, there's not much flavoring in that.



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The next step up might be a store-bought treat that is a little bit more robust. Like it might be freeze dried liver, or something that you can buy that most dogs would like. You can ask them at the store, “what would be great for any dog?” And you're going to go up. So, then you're going to try homemade salmon treats. We'll leave a [link to a recipe here](#) for you.

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If you're buying store bought, try and buy something with tripe in it. And I apologize, don't put it in your pocket, it's going to stink. But that is something that most dogs really, really like. And then cheese. You want to try different kinds of cheese.

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I'm not a fan of feeding a dog hot dogs and I really would discourage you from doing that, because there's so much crap: salts, nitrates. No. Let's keep dogs healthy, stay away from hot dogs. But you can buy some chicken and cook up some chicken or some beef, and we're going to go up the ladder. I'm going to tell you my dogs love, love, love cooked salmon, cooked venison, cooked bison. And you're going, “Holy smokes, Susan. These are gonna cost me a fortune.” I'm just giving you suggestions of things that might be outrageous, high value. But let me tell you one of the highest value food for most dogs is what's different.

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So, whatever you've been trying, put that away, don't bring that out right now. Let's get 10 things low to high, of things that are different. Once you've got the value, your 10 from outrageous to ‘yeah, they like them.’ Then we're going to go locations in your home. I'd like you to find at least five. If you've got a one-bedroom apartment, we could still get probably close to five.

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And that your bedroom, wherever you sleep, that would be one location. Your bathroom, there's a second location. Your kitchen or wherever your hot plate is, that's another location. The door you go in and out of. Right at the threshold where the door closes is one location. Open that door up to the outside, that's another. So now we have 10 values, five locations, the last category is, different times of day.

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So, they could be times of day near an event, like if you're coming or going to work, or when the dog's being fed, or when the dog's being walked, or when something gets happening. Different times of day. And what I want you to do, is cross reference all these lists. What is a zero, dog-won't-touch-it, on your list, in what location, during different times of the day? Now your dog may or may not change at different times of the day. So that one isn't as important. Just stick with the locations to begin with. But do them all at the same time of the day. So, what is a zero? – Dog doesn't want it. What is a one? – Yeah, it's okay, dog will eat it. What is a two? – Yep, that's good.

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And how can you tell? Because if the dog, if you present it and the dog looks away, that's a zero. If they won't take it or they take it and put it back on the ground, that's a zero. The one, they might take it and look away while they're chewing it and take a long time to chew it. The good might be they take it, and they swallow it right away. So that is good, is a two.



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And outrageous, you can see the ears go up, they grab it, they go “Whoa! What was that?!” And then their tail starts like going, they're like, “I want more of that!” That is outrageous.

Now you might own a dog that has got threes all across the board. Chances are that dog will take treats outside. If not, stick with me. Because the next thing we're going to do is we're going to create intentional triggers.

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So, the things that are going to lower that value of food for the dog when you're outside is events like maybe just putting on the leash, or things that scare the dog or things that excite the dog. And so what we need to do is create triggers that are more powerful than those things. Right, so we're going to intentionally create triggers.

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I would encourage you to go to [episode number 107](#) where I share how to create value for nail trimmers in my Pedicure Please episode. And we're going to do the same thing with things you need to go training with.

So, if your dog wears a collar all the time, you don't need to do this with a collar, but definitely do it with a leash. And if you use a harness, do it with a harness.

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You're going to, exactly as I outlined in 107, your first training session, you're going to go to what's a 'three' outrageous treats for your dog; somewhere in the location that is the highest value for that dog.

And what you're going to do is you're just going to pull the leash out and give your dog the outrageous treat, put the leash back in. Pull out like a hairbrush – meaningless, pull out a roll of paper towels – meaningless, and then pull out the leash again, give the dog outrageous treats.

Do that three or four times and then put that away, end of one session. You're going to do this so that the dog sees the leash and they're going to go crazy, and do the same thing for whatever it is you take with you walking.

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When I was a pharmaceutical sales rep, I used to take my dogs with me on all my calls and my older Jack Russell, as she got older, she decided she didn't like to go. And so, she knew when I was putting on the more posh 'going to prayer meeting' kind of shoes, that I was going to work and she would go and hop it up in the bed and she didn't want to come.

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And when I was putting on running shoes or boots in the winter, she knew we're going walking and she was all in. So, boots or shoes might be a trigger for your dog. And so do the same thing.

We want to create “Oh my gosh, this is exciting!”, [we want that trigger](#).

You're going to do the same thing so that the dog sees it and you're going to go down to lower value locations.

All the way until you can go at the front door because that's probably going to be the one that's going to be the lowest.



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You're just going to stick with the high ones until the dog gets super excited when they see the leash in all your other environments. You're going to go to the one that's the toughest environment. The one that dog gets the most "Oh, I don't really want to do this." You're going to do that one last. And if the dog will take the treats at the front door, then try to open the front door. If they won't take them with the door open, then close it and open it a crack.

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Work back and forth, until you've worked through all those locations. You're going to do the same thing with your harness, and then you're going to go to a lower value treat.

You're going to mix in some good treats, some number twos with some number threes. And so, the dog is going, "Oh, well I like number twos as much as I like number threes." Because the value of the number two is going to go into the value of number three.

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Now that we've got that, you're going to start pretend walking in your living room. Clip on the leash, get the dog beside you, give them a treat in what we call Reinforcement Zone, take it off, that's it. You're going to just go through this routine in all five of those locations around your house until the dog thinks 'this is the best thing ever!'

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Then we're going to try to walk a little bit. I want you to rehearse walking slow and then turn, and run, depending on how big your house or apartment is, you're going to turn and you might run in a circle, and then give your dog a treat. Because that's another way to jack up value. Motion, changing the dog's physiology can change the value. Maybe tossing the treat, teaching your dog to catch. That can change the dog's physiology.

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A hand target. There's a video over on YouTube where I teach [how to do a Hand Target](#). Get your dog to jump up in the air and touch your hand, and then give them a cookie. So, when you get them to jump, that makes it more likely for them to take the treats. Simple in the house, you can kind of push the dog back with your hand, toss the treat, and tell them get it and then you can run away.

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These are things that are just going to increase the value of treats and you're going to do it with the goods, and the ones that are just okay. Eventually we want the ones that they just didn't want before.

And so, we are increasing the value of the food. We're building triggers in the leash and in your position, we're building triggers in you walking, and we're going to add new words.

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So, the "It's okay. It's okay." They're gone. We're in the house, we're going to use words like "sup-pah!" when the dog's excited. So that's a word that gets him even more excited because he knows a high value cookie's going to come.

You say "sup-pah!" give a cookie or you say, "who's a good dog?" or whatever it is you want to say. I like to use the word "cookie," which means a really high value cookie is going to come to my dog.



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So, this is all about being intentional. Yeah, you're going to be a little kooky. You're not going outside for a bit. Of course, you've got to take your dog out to do their business, but you're going to be rehearsing [walking on leash](#) in the house.

And then when the dog is super excited as soon as they see the leash and they start walking, you can go out the door, one step back in the door, close, take the leash off, that's it. Try to get like a couple of steps.

Now, if you know there are triggers, cars, skateboards, other dogs, children, you're going to stay away from those, guys.

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You need to counter condition those separately, but first we got to get the dog taking food before any counter conditioning can happen. So, walking up and down just a little bit in front of your house or your apartment, two or three steps, that's a huge accomplishment.

And when you do it, I really want you to come back here, come over to YouTube, write in the comments of this episode "Guess what, we got the dog eating cookies outside!"

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"Three" cookies first and eventually you could mix in some number two cookies with the threes and eventually one, two, or threes. Before you know it, you will have no zero cookies, because you've got that transfer of value. Just believe the dog. Watch the dog's body language. And if they're showing you that they are getting more worried, you've got to get them out of that environment. The goal is for them never to look at you and say, "I'm worried." Because once they've got that 'oh, I'm not sure about this' look, it means they've already gone [over threshold](#), one level of threshold.

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So we want to prevent that by just doing short walks, lots of [good triggers](#), forget your old triggers and have a dog who happily takes food outside. Now, if you live in an apartment and you have a balcony, you could just start doing this outside on the balcony. The most important thing is that there's fresh air.

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If you can't get to the balcony, open some windows and do it near an open window. So, the trigger of fresh air could be one that the dog's going, "Oh, fresh air, I get good cookies, I love this!" Being intentional, putting in building blocks, and then you're going to say, "Oh Susan, this seems like a lot of work."

It's not work, it's fun. It's having sessions with your dog that helps build their confidence. How can that ever be work? It's about a relationship. We're building a deeper relationship with our dog.

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And if you had a child who lacked confidence in some area, you wouldn't say, "Oh man, this is work." No, because you love to see that child flourish. You love to see the confidence grow. You love to see them say, "Hey, I can throw a baseball outside now." "Hey, I want to be on a team."

That's what your dog is showing you. "I can go outside just like a normal dog. I can take treats in Reinforcement Zone. This is good. What are you doing? Running on the spot? That's fine."



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Have those games in your toolbox. So, when you go outside you know you can change pace, walk normal, do a little bit of fast, do a little bit of plant your foot, pivot, turn the other way, and give your dog cookies. Do some hand targets, do some 'who's a good boy?'. I don't know where that came from. But whatever you want to do, come on back here and let me know how successful it's been for you.

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Outside the box thinking to a problem that isn't just 'just get higher value food.' It's a lot more than that. And when you put in the extra layers your dog's going to go, "Oh, thank you. Thank you. You got me. This is awesome." I'll see you next time right here on Shaped by Dog.

Resources:

[Podcast Episode 59: Why Your Treats Aren't Working for Your Dog](#)

[YouTube Playlist: Reactive or Aggressive Dogs: Key Insights with Susan Garrett](#)

[Podcast Episode 92: Avoid This Big Mistake When Feeding Your Dog](#)

[Tasty Treats eBook](#)

[Podcast Episode 107: Pedicure Please: 3 Steps To Dog Nail Trimming Or Grooming Success At Home!](#)

[Blog Post: Identifying And Using Positive Triggers For Your Dog](#)

[Podcast Episode 68: 3 Easy Tricks Every Dog Should Know](#)

[YouTube Playlist: Loose Leash Walking with Susan Garrett](#)

[Podcast Episode 112: Stressed Dog? How Trigger Stacking Might Be Putting Your Dog Over Threshold](#)



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About Susan

A world-leading educator of dog trainers, Susan is also one of the most successful agility competitors of the last three decades. She has won multiple Gold Medals at National or World Championship events with every dog she has ever owned over the past 30 years. Susan was one of the very first dog trainers to share knowledge online when she opened her "Clicker Dogs" website many years ago. Susan has helped hundreds of thousands of people enjoy a great relationship with their dogs through her workshops and keynote speaking around the world, award winning books, DVDs, magazine articles, blog posts, podcasts, free dog training and dog agility video series, and online dog training programs.



A natural teacher and an entertaining speaker, Susan is world renowned for her dog training knowledge and practical application of that knowledge. Her understanding of how to apply science-based learning principles to both competitive and family pet dog training has been pivotal in changing how dogs are trained.

Susan is now helping many thousands of dog owners in 82 countries have the best relationship possible with their dogs. The real joy for her comes from bringing confidence to dogs and their owner through playful interactions and relationship building games that are grounded firmly in the science of how animals learn.



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