

June 9, 2010

Dog Training: Nothing in Life is Free

The Humane Society of the United States



You're relaxing on the sofa reading the paper when your dog bumps your leg to get your attention. You ignore him so he plops his ball in your lap.

You ignore him again so, being a persistent pup, he sticks his head under the newspaper, making it impossible for you to read that story about what your neighbor was caught doing. Exasperated, you toss the ball for your dog. Boy, has he got you trained!

Do you wish the roles were reversed?

If so, a training technique called "Nothing in Life is Free" may be just the solution you're looking for. "Nothing in Life is Free" isn't a magic pill that will solve a specific behavior problem. Instead, it's a way of living with your dog that will help him behave better because he trusts and accepts you as his leader and is confident knowing his place in the family.

What is "Nothing in Life is Free"?

You have resources—food, treats, toys, and attention. Your dog wants those resources. Make him earn them. That's the basis of "Nothing in Life is Free." When your dog does what you want, he gets rewarded with the thing he wants.

You may also hear this aspect of training called "No Free Lunch" or "Say Please." Those are just other names for "Nothing in Life is Free."

How to practice "Nothing in Life is Free"

1. First, [use positive reinforcement methods](#) to teach your dog a few commands and/or tricks. "Sit," "Down," "Come," and "Stay" are useful commands. "Shake," "Speak," and "Roll over" are fun tricks to teach your dog.
2. Stop giving away resources. Do you mindlessly pet your dog for no reason? Stop. Your attention is a valuable resource to your dog. Don't give it away. Make him earn it.
3. Once your dog has mastered a few commands, you can begin to practice "Nothing In Life Is Free."

Before you give your dog anything (food, a treat, a walk, etc.) he must first perform one of the commands he has

learned. For example:

- In order for you to put your dog's leash on to go for a walk, he must sit until you've put the leash on.
- When you feed your dog, he must sit and stay until you've put the bowl on the floor.
- Play a game of fetch after work and make your dog sit and "shake hands" each time you throw the toy.
- Rub your dog's belly while watching TV, but make him lie down and roll over before being petted.

4. Once you've given the command, don't give your dog what he wants until he does what you want. If he refuses to perform the command, don't give in. Be patient and remember that eventually he will have to obey your command to get what he wants.

5. Make sure your dog knows the command well and understands what you want before you begin practicing "Nothing in Life is Free."

The benefits of this technique

Requiring your dog to work for everything he wants is a safe, positive, non-confrontational way to establish your leadership position.

Even if your dog never displays aggressive behavior such as growling, snarling, or snapping, he can still manipulate you. He may be affectionate to the point of being "pushy," such as nudging your hand to be petted or "worming" his way onto the furniture to be close to you. This technique gently reminds the dog that he must abide by your rules.

Fearful dogs may become more confident by obeying commands. As they succeed in learning more tricks, their continued success will increase confidence and ultimately lead them to feeling more comfortable and less stressed.

Why this technique works

Dogs want good stuff. If the only way to get it is to do what you ask, they'll do it.

Good leadership encourages good behavior by providing the guidance and boundaries dogs need.

Practicing "Nothing in Life is Free" gently and effectively communicates to your dog that you are the leader because you control all the resources.