While the phrase “Trick or Treat” usually brings to mind pumpkins, candy and other Halloween delights, it can also be a simple reminder of how to teach our dogs to have good manners.

The treat part is fairly easy. Using a food reward to shape behavior is something most people understand. Thinking of the treat as a paycheck for a command properly executed goes a long way toward a well behaved dog. Many puppies will sit nicely or shake a paw for a treat within the first weeks of coming to a new home. These things are common knowledge for most dog owners. But let me offer a couple other thoughts on the use of treats and how to encourage good manners by using them as something other than a lure—reward.

• Food can be used to prevent boredom. Giving a dog something to actively chew on while he or she needs to be crated teaches the pups to entertain themselves calmly while you are busy or away. There are a variety of toys on the market designed for stuffing with treats. The most well know is the KONG brand. In fact, KONG even provides tips on how to stuff the toys so that your dog can learn to win the game and you can gradually make the challenges more difficult to encourage even greater mental stimulation. Bones such as knucklebones and femurs from the butcher can work well also, but do exercise caution if your dog has any possessiveness issues.

• Treats can also be used to encourage new and better behaviors by using them as a surprise discovery. Think of the feeling you have when you discover that unknown five-dollar bill in your pants pocket. Makes you check the pockets of the laundry, doesn’t it? Or imagine walking into a store and being the 1000th customer and winning a shopping spree. That will probably increase your likelihood of returning to that store, won’t it? You can do the same with your dog. If your dog discovers treats in the back of his kennel (without seeing you put them there) he might just learn that it is a good place to hang out more often. Or consider a food morsel appearing on your dog’s bed each and every time the doorbell rings. What conclusion can your dog draw from that occurrence?

• The other aspect of successful training is to make those annoying behaviors unrewarding for the dog. In other words you set up situations to trick your dog into believing those bad behaviors are unpleasant. For example if your dog is not allowed on the furniture but sneaks up there when you aren’t supervising you can use a plastic floor mat (the type designed for use on a carpeted surface) placed with the nubby side up on your couch. Each time your dog jumps up on the furniture it will now be uncomfortable. In time the dog will stop trying to jump up there because she will believe something very strange happened to the couch and it is just not a nice place to lay down anymore.

Next time you are trying to find a way to get rid of your dog’s bad habit and replace it with a more appropriate one, remember the simple idea of Trick or Treat!