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## Variable Rate Reinforcement

When animals are first learning a new behaviour such as sitting politely every time you stop on a walk, it's best to reward them immediately and every single time they get the task right and to be sure you never accidentally reward the undesired behaviour. By being consistent, you make it clear what you want. Once the puppy knows the behaviour well, you can strengthen that behaviour even more by going to a variable schedule of reward.

In this situation you reward on average every second, third, fourth or more times the dog does the behaviour correctly but not exactly every second, third or further time. Sometimes the dog may be rewarded each time it performs the behaviour and sometimes it gets rewarded every fifth time the behaviour is performed correctly. That way the dog never knows which time it is going to get rewarded for the desired behaviour that it already knows pretty well.

This predictably unpredictable schedule of rewards - variable rate reinforcement - has been shown to be the strongest schedule of reinforcement. In fact, it's one reason why people enjoy gambling - they may see that the odds of winning are good, but they don't know exactly which time they will win.

We need to be a one armed bandit with our dogs - rewarding so they never know, when, how often, how many or what type the reward will be - e.g. high value or low value. We should not be a vending machine because that makes us boring and predictable and no effort is needed and it is less fun.