

Training Exercises

Attention

One of the first things you want your dog to master is eye contact and attention. Direct eye contact can be (for some dogs) very difficult as it is actually confrontational canine behavior. Once a dog is conditioned to do so and understands it is the beginning of good things, it makes teaching sessions less stressful.

It is safe to say if you do not have the attention of your audience, your message may not get through. How often have you caught yourself moving your attention away from someone who is talking to you? How much did you get from the conversation? When your dog is focused on you, giving you eye contact, and his full attention he is ready to work with you and to take in what you are teaching.

Attention and eye contact can also be used to help your dog focus when stressed, afraid or nervous. If you are working on desensitizing him to something, you can have him look to you when the stressor is present instead of reacting to it.

To teach this you simply hold a treat at or near your eyes, using the old “pork chop around the neck” to get him to play theory. When your dog looks at or toward your face, mark and reinforce (YES or click and give him the treat). Once your dog is looking at or toward you reliably, move the food away from your face. Hold your arm out perpendicular to your body and wait, when his eyes shift toward your face mark and reinforce. Repeat this process until you can have your dog looking at you for several minutes before marking and reinforcing. At this point, you can add a verbal cue such as “Watch me” or something you will remember easily. You will get the behavior, say the verbal cue and reinforce (the marker is no longer needed when the dog is performing the behavior reliably on cue and past the initial acquisition stage).

Sit on verbal cue

This motion should encourage your dog to look up at the treat and follow it with his nose, which will (in most cases) cause him to put his butt on the ground.

To add the verbal cue, you must make sure your dog is reliably sitting (with the hand motion). Once you are able to get your dog into a sit 8 out of 10 times reliably you can add your cue. As your dog sits, say “Sit”, mark and reinforce.

Default behavior

When you are not offering your dog any communication he should not be free to just do as he wants (unless you have released him to do so). He should be offering a default behavior that is his “between” communication behavior.

Some dogs that default to a sit and others that default to a down; either is fine, as is a stand. The goal is the dog is near me and waiting for the next communication.

Attention



Reinforce your dog for eye contact or looking toward your face.

Sit on verbal cue



To teach the sit hold a treat in your hand at your dog's nose.



Slowly move your treat back and over your dog's head.

When you are standing around, with your dog on a lead, wait for him to offer a behavior such a sit or down, then mark and reinforce. It is very important you do not cue your dog. He has to make a choice and offer the behavior with no prompting from you. If you tell your dog what to do instead of defaulting to a behavior he will simply wait for you to tell him what to do. This may be fine while he is on lead, but will not work well once you try for off lead control later.

Introducing your marker

For your behavior marker to work, you must first help your dog associate it with the primary reinforcement. To begin you will be using treats as they are the typically more enticing and motivating when dealing with competing reinforcers.

This is needed for use of a mechanical marker so your dog can make the connection between the marker and the incoming reinforcement.

Simply use your marker (click), wait approximately 1/2 a second then offer your dog the reinforcement. Repeat 10 times, take a small break then do another 10 repetitions, take a small break then 10 more. Put your marker away for a brief period then pull it out and repeat. You should begin to notice your dog having a reaction to the sound of the clicker now as he understands the sound means a treat.

If your dog is afraid of the clicker either find a soft click or use a verbal marker.

For fun, (and a challenge) use a tennis ball to work on timing. Try to mark (click-Yes") when the ball hits the floor.

