

Integrative Veterinary Care

Basic Obedience

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“Obedience” is more than something we just ask our dogs for during active training sessions, and “training” is much more than something that is limited to a fixed 6 or 8 week course attended while our dogs are still young. “Obedience” is your dog’s response when you ask him to do something – sit, down, stay, come, etc. “Training” is mental and physical exercise for your dog, and strengthens your relationship with him.

When we school or train a dog to obedience, we enter into a partnership with our dog. We make a commitment to act as part of a team – to be a good teammate. This means following certain rules of conduct:

the other. Everyone handling the dog must use the same commands.

- **One command, one response.** You say it once, your dog does it once. Promptly.
- **No nagging.** If you’re going to say “no,” say it like you mean it. If you’re going to give a leash correction, do it – one sharp yank is worth a thousand small tugs and will resolve the issue much more quickly. Make your corrections count.
- **No overcorrection.** Use only as much “no” as you need to. (This takes practice.)
- **Do not punish an honest mistake.** If your dog is confused or worried, or you’re working on old skills in a new environment and he’s making mistakes, step back. He may need a short refresher course to remind him what a “sit stay” is the first time he has to do it on a playground with children running around. Only use “no” or a leash correction when you are certain you are doing so fairly.
- **Strive to be a “good boss.”** Make your dog want to work for you. If you approach training with a positive attitude, don’t belabor “boring” exercises, and intersperse play with work, your dog will enjoy working with you. This makes his responses to you much more rapid and reliable off-leash and outside of formal training sessions!

And most importantly:

- **Reward often.** Initially, the reward will be a treat and praise. As proficiency in an exercise increases, treats will be replaced more and more often with petting and praise. Pairing the treat with the praise often enough will eventually make praise a “yummy” reward!
- **Set your dog up to succeed.** Make exercises easy initially and show your dog what you want by guiding him calmly. Increase the difficulty of the exercise gradually, by asking for more precision or by adding distractions. Back up and proceed more slowly if your dog is making mistakes repeatedly at one level of distraction. Dogs, like other animals, will quit trying if they hear that they are “wrong” too often.

The basic commands

Sit

This command is extremely useful. It is your means of getting your dog to stop jumping up on people and to greet them politely and it is the quickest way to bring your dog under control when he gets excited in public. To teach it, I start by facing my dog, usually at his side with his head facing to my right. I get a piece of treat in my right hand, get him to sniff it, and then move the treat up over his head and back toward his tail, causing him to lift his head up and back to follow it. Your dog may try all sorts of contortions initially, trying to get the food, but be persistent

and only yield the jackpot when your dog's rear hits the ground. You may find it helpful to restrict your dog's backward motion and/or help guide him into a sit, at least initially, using your left hand.

Down

Start from a sit. Have your treat in your right hand and your left hand poised over your dog's shoulder blades in case you need to apply a small amount of downward pressure to get him to down. Get your dog interested in the treat as for the sit, then move the treat down and toward his chest, between his front legs, and then out in front of him. Do this slowly. You may have to back up and repeat several times. Make sure your dog's nose continues to follow the treat as it moves. When his elbows touch the floor, yield the treat.

"Puppy pushups" are a training exercise in which you steer your dog from sit to down and back again repeatedly, yielding the treat at random intervals.

Stand

Start from a sit. Use a treat to lure your dog's nose forward until he stands, then yield the treat. You may need to lure your dog forward a step at first to get him to stand, or you may need to prompt him with a hand under his belly in front of his rear legs (just lift gently).

Points to remember

When asking your dog for one of the "still" behaviors – down, sit or stand – in an exciting situation, you need to remember that there is a definite difference in the inherent energy of each position. "Stand" is basically "ready to go" – your dog can go from a stand stay to a full tilt run without even knowing he's done it! "Sit" is a little calmer – its two steps removed from forward or upward motion. "Down" is the "calmest" command and is the least likely to be reflexively converted into frenzied activity. "Sit" is usually the easiest "still" behavior for a young dog to maintain when he's excited. Sometimes a young dog can't concentrate well enough, at least early in his training, to "down" while he's excited. (A "down" is, however, the easiest to enforce without you having to think about it because you can simply stand on the leash, keeping just enough slack in the leash that your dog can barely get his elbows off of the ground.) Most dogs have difficulty maintaining a stand when they're excited!

Ask for each of the "still" behaviors throughout the day. You don't have to restrict working on them to a set schedule. Three or four repetitions of each position two or three times a day should have your dog switching between sit, down and stand in any order without confusion. You may either ask for the behavior once by name while steering your dog with the food, or you may add the name of the command after you and your dog have the steering part down reliably. Whichever method you choose, make certain that you only ask for the behavior by name once and always praise the behavior with "good (command)" as you give the treat.

Stays

Teaching a good stay can be very difficult. Your dog must first understand the "still" behavior commands well enough that you can ask for them by name, standing in front of your dog, without prompting. I start with the "sit stay". Ask for a sit while standing right in front of your dog. Treat the sit, then keep your hand up in front of the dog, palm toward the dog, like a policeman signalling for a "stop." Say "stay" and praise "good stay" while feeding your dog. If the dog stands, gently say "no, stay" and use your hands to fold him back into a sit. If he lies down, ask for a "sit" and start over. At first, ask for 5-10 seconds at a time then release your dog. Work your way up to a 30 second stay, then begin asking for a stay and stepping back six inches. Expect your dog to follow you at first. Gently replace him saying "no, stay." The "no" should coincide with the instant his hiney leaves the ground. Work your way up to a 30 second stay again, treating your dog often. Then move 12 inches and start over again, etc.

You must go back to your dog often to treat and praise! As his confidence increases, you can wean down the treats and eventually even the praise, but you must always move to your dog

to give the treats. Until your dog can do a two minute sit stay at a distance, release your dog from his stay only while you are standing next to him! Don't allow the joy of watching your dog race towards you in gleeful anticipation of beef liver prompt you to start doing recalls from a stay too soon. If you do, you risk being trained by your dog to release him when he decides to break!

Proofing

All exercises need to be "proofed" against distractions. The first stage of proofing sits, downs and stands is just varying the location that you practice in. The second stage is increasing the level of distraction -- ie, asking your dog to perform the action while he is excited or while interesting things are happening around him. This can be done by practicing exercises in locations outside of your house or neighborhood: Playgrounds, dog parks, cow pastures, horse barns, malls, grocery stores, feed stores, etc.

Proofing stays is a little more difficult. The first stage of proofing stays is simply moving further away from your dog. The further away you get, the more your dog will want to "break" and follow you. When your dog can remain in a sit-stay for one minute with you six feet away and no reinforcement other than "good stay" during that minute, it's time to move to the next stage.

Put your dog on a sit-stay as you have been doing. Take one step back and then one step to the left or right. Be prepared to "catch" your dog as he begins to break. Changing the direction of your movement makes this a new exercise, so be patient. If your dog stays when you move one step to the side, praise him, return to his front, treat him, and try it again. Gradually work up to moving sideways around your dog in a complete circle. If he breaks his stay, "catch" him with a "no" and pressure on the leash, replace him in his sit, and try again. When you can move all the way around your dog in both directions, start increasing your distance from the dog as you move around him (one step at a time). Once you can do the exercise at a 12-15 foot distance, move back in towards him again and work on being able to jump in place, do jumping jacks, skip around him, etc. Always move back to your dog's front or to heel position to give him treats at this stage.

The next stage of proofing is to use objects as distractions. Use your dogs' favorite toy. Ask for the sit stay, show him the toy, remind him to stay, and move the toy around in front of him or over his head. Just move it a few inches at first. If he breaks, help him back to his sit. If he succeeds, praise him, treat him, and release him to get the toy. Progress to getting him to stay while you walk around him with the toy in your hand; then to being able to throw the toy on the ground; then to being able to step away and throw the toy over him, in front of him, or behind him; and eventually to being able to have a friend throw the toy to you while the dog holds his stay.

The final phase is finding as many distracting situations as you can to work on stays in. This includes parks full of kids, walkways adjacent to livestock pens, downtown areas or outdoor malls, and groves of trees full of squirrels.

You must go through the entire proofing sequence for the sit stay, the down stay, and the stand stay to ensure that your dog truly understands the meaning of "stay". Any time you ask for a stay in a new situation, take care to ensure that you are protecting your dog from possible harm. This means never asking for a stay in a location where your dog may be injured if he obeys your command. It also means maintaining a leash on your dog to keep him from breaking and getting in harm's way while you work with him. You can use a long line or you can drive a tent stake into the ground to tether your dog to. Either way, you must be able to "catch" your dog if he breaks, before he can get into trouble.