

## *Integrative Veterinary Care*

### The Wait Command

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This is a command that may literally one day save your dog's life. You can use it in many situations – at street corners, at doorways, at feeding time. “Wait” means “cease forward movement”. “Wait” does not require a sit or a down, and is not equivalent to a stay, though it does require a release word. If you ask your dog to “wait” at a doorway, he can sit, stand, lie down, or run in circles as long as he does not cross the imaginary line that exists in front of where his feet were when you asked him to “wait”.

I like to start “wait” at feeding time. I say the word and begin to put the food bowl on the floor. The instant the dog begins forward movement, the bowl comes back up and I remind the dog, “No, wait”. I say “Good wait” over and over as long as the dog makes no forward movement. I may even use the hand that is not holding the bowl to signal a stay gesture to help the dog understand. The first few sessions, I release the dog and withdraw my “helping” hand, giving the release word as the bowl touches the floor. Over a few more days, I will begin to release the dog after 2, 3, 4, 5, then 10- or more seconds. A break is met only with a gentle “No, wait” and withdrawal of the food bowl.

Once “wait” has been firmly established at feeding time, I begin to teach it in other situations. I use doorways next. I start with a swinging door inside the house, usually my bedroom door. Starting with the dog and myself inside the room and the door closed, I ask the dog to “wait” as I begin to crack the door. I repeat “wait, good wait” often, and may use my helping hand in a “stay” gesture to make it easier. At first, I crack the door only an inch or two, shutting it quickly if the dog begins to break. Once I can hold the door open for a 2 count without the dog breaking, I begin opening the door a little farther each time. – no more than one inch more per repetition. Each break is met with a “No” and a quick shutting movement of the door. It shouldn't take long to get the dog to wait until the door is wide open and you give the release word before he moves through.

It's OK to bonk your dog's nose with the door. Make sure that you do it gently. You are trying to close the door quickly, just far enough to prevent your dog from going through it, not slam the door shut. You are trying to teach your dog that it is absolutely IMPERATIVE not to move through that door until he is released to do so. It usually only takes one or two bumps with the door for the dog to get the idea. This is the only exercise during which I use a potentially painful negative stimulus to get the response I want.

Once “wait” at the bedroom door has been firmly established, begin generalizing “wait” to other doors in the household, taking treats from your hand, and the back door. Only then is it time to work “wait” at the front door. When working “wait” at the front door, always have your dog's leash tightly in your grasp in case you don't get the door shut fast enough and he bolts through. You may need to use gentle tension on the leash at first to remind your dog to wait until released.

Once you have gotten “wait” generalized to all doorways in the house, begin using it at curbsides on walks, in the car, and while playing fetch. In the car, you may want to secure your dog using a seatbelt harness or a leash affixed to something rigid (like the headrest base, a seatbelt eyehole, or a “chicken” bar) to prevent absolute breaks. When playing fetch, leave a leash on your dog and stand on the leash to prevent breaks. Remove your foot from the leash when you give the release word.

Use “wait” whenever possible for at least a month. For at least 6 months, do not allow your dog out the front door without a leash on and a “wait” command preceding exit from the house. We want the dog to “forget” that he was ever able to go through the door – in either

direction – without your permission first. You should also practice "wait in motion" -- that is, asking for a wait while you are walking beside your dog on leash. You will have to help your dog stop forward movement by applying gentle tension on the lead at first. The goal is to be able to ask for the "wait" and then walk ahead of the dog, leaving the dog behind you until he is released.