

Training a dog to settle or relax

An important training exercise is to teach a dog to settle down or relax on command. For calming and settling a dog as a training command (e.g., steady, look, focus), the goal is to teach the dog to focus on the owner. Another form of settle (go to your mat) is intended to calm a dog that is overly anxious, aroused, excitable, or fearful in the home. Dogs should also be taught a relaxed walk on loose leash to help maintain a calm demeanor when outdoors on walks.

Once the dog has learned to settle, the command can be used to help achieve a calm response during the correction or management of a wide variety of behavior problems. It can be used to get the dog to focus when it might be overly excited or anxious in greeting family members, strangers, or other animals. It can also be used with dogs that become anxious as the owners prepare to depart or become overly excited when company arrives or when preparing for a walk.

Training a dog to settle and focus should begin in an environment where your dog is calm and there are minimal or no distractions. The owners will need to be able to cue their dog to settle with lure training or a leash and head halter, or by watching and observing the pet until it is sufficiently settled and marking the behavior with an immediate reward (such as with a clicker). Pets on a structured interaction program (see handout #13, available online) can be taught a settled sit or down each time they want attention or affection by waiting for the desired behavior and giving immediate attention as soon as the pet shows a settled sit or down. A cue (hand signal or command) is then added to be able to repeat the behavior reliably in a variety of situations and environments. Food, affection, or a favored toy can all serve as rewards if they are consistently given immediately following the behavior. You will need to be able to read and monitor canine body language and behavior (breathing, body postures, facial expressions, and the absence of any signs of anxiety) to be able to shape gradually more relaxed behaviors of increasing duration.

Calming exercises for any location

1. Teaching “steady”

- While standing still, give the pet 1 meter (3–4 feet) of the leash. If the leash remains loose, occasionally give it a food or social reward and say “steady.”
- When the pet starts to walk away, the “steady” command is given. As the pet gets to the end of the leash and starts to tug and pull against the leash, a final “steady” command is given followed by a gentle pull on the leash to get the pet’s attention. Then return the slack on the leash as a reward.
- If the pet remains on loose leash, immediately give a treat or affection as a reward.
- After several repetitions, the pet should learn that it is rewarded for maintaining a loose leash.
- Practice a couple of times a day in the home with few distractions. As the pet gets better, gradually add distractions and start working outside.
- Progress to walking on loose leash using “steady” whenever your dog begins to pull or put tension on the leash. Give rewards after each short stretch that your dog walks without pulling and gradually make the walks slightly longer before rewards are given. If necessary, stop and begin again when the leash is slack; however, over the long term, the goal is for your dog to walk calmly by your side for some or all of its walk.
- This can also be used to stop tugging and pulling on the leash while walking or to get the pet to stand calmly when meeting or greeting visitors.

2. Teaching “look” or “focus”

- Show your dog a favored toy or treat and then hide it behind your back. Have your back against the wall or be in a corner so the dog can’t get behind you. An alternative method is to hide the treat in your closed hand in front of your chest in a line between your dog’s eyes and your eyes.
- Say “look” or “focus” and as soon as your dog stops its attempt to get the treat and makes eye contact, use your reward word or clicker and give the treat. Repeat to improve consistency and immediacy.
- Gradually increase the amount of time you require eye contact to last and then start adding distractions in the background like people playing or a fridge door opening. Your dog only gets rewarded after maintaining (i.e., not breaking) eye contact with you. Once the dog is consistent in giving the correct response even when there are distractions, go to other places (outside) and add mild distractions, such as another dog nearby or children playing. After each successful session gradually increase the distractions and work in busier environments.
- The goal is for your dog to maintain calm and steady eye contact for several minutes, regardless of the amount of distraction and background activity. If the dog is focused but arousal is high, gradually work to shape calmer responses.

3. Teaching “settle” in a down position

- Another method is to use food lure training to train the dog to lie down in a relaxed position, on its belly with both hind legs on the same side. If the pet is excited, barking, or unsettled, wait until it is calm to give the reward. Timing is everything, so clicker training can be a useful tool to achieve increasing relaxation. Reward progressively longer downs and more relaxed postures.
- Gradually progress to longer down stays in a variety of environments and then gradually increase the background noise and distractions.

4. Head halter training

- The head halter can be used concurrently with lure–reward training, or by itself, to teach the pet to assume a relaxed position.
- The head halter is used immediately following the command to get the dog to focus and gently pull or prompt it into the settle position (steady, focus, down).
- As soon as the pet relaxes, the tension on the leash is relaxed and a favored reward is given.

Indoor exercises

Although any of the above exercises can also be used for training a dog to be calm indoors, there are additional techniques that might help the dog to settle down quickly and effectively when indoors. These techniques can be used to help reduce anxiety associated with owner departures or fearful stimuli such as thunder, as well as to calm dogs that are unruly and excitable or overly aroused when visitors come onto the property or enter the home (see client handout #25, available online).

1. Teaching a settle location

- Training the dog to settle indoors can sometimes be more easily accomplished by using a settle area. The dog can be taught to “go to a mat” or “go to a kennel” where it learns to stay calmly for progressively longer periods of time for affection and food rewards and food-stuffed toys or chews.
- Food lure training, with or without the aid of a head halter, can be used to achieve the initial response. The dog is taught to stay calmly for progressively longer periods of time before the reward and affection are given.
- At first the owner may need to take the dog to the area to ensure success, but as the training progresses, the dog should learn to go to the area on command to receive its rewards.
- If the dog is also taught to sleep in this area and favored toys are kept in the area, it may soon learn to go to this area to relax on its own.
- Additional tools to help ensure effective timing of rewards include clicker training (where the dog can be rewarded immediately whenever it lies in the area and then for progressively relaxed behaviors) or a Manners Minder, which can be set up in the dog’s settle location to deliver rewards remotely.
- Once the dog will go to the area and settle on command, training should progress to situations where the dog is slightly more aroused, such as when there are stimuli outdoors, company arrives at the door, or when practicing departures. A leash and head halter left attached can help ensure success.

2. Settled sit or down stay

- Teaching a dog to a settled sit or down is discussed above. In addition, see our handout on structured interactive training (client handout #13, available online) which refers to structured interactions in which the dog must learn to sit or lie down prior to any affection or rewards being given. Since structured interactions and predictable consequences give dogs control over their rewards, this is an effective way to teach these behaviors and reduce underlying stress or conflict.
- In effect, this means that there are three ways to teach the focused sit and relaxed down: (1) lure–reward training, as described above; (2) head halter training to prompt the desired behavior; and (3) avoiding all interactions until the desired behavior is observed and immediately rewarding the behavior with affection, treat, or clicker/treat. Once the behavior is achieved, the cue word or command should be added to put the behavior under verbal control.
- The balance of the training involves monitoring facial expressions, body postures, and breathing to be able to shape progressively more relaxed behaviors.
- Training should then progress to longer sits and down stays in a variety of locations, and then adding background noises and distractions.