

Training basic commands (cues)

Introduction

Obedience training is important for all dogs. The best way to get the job done is to start early in the pet's life, use positive reinforcement, and avoid punishment. This will help ensure quick learning and make the training process fun. If you begin the pet's training when it is a puppy, you'll find that early training, well-timed rewards, repetition and consistency can be a big help in establishing control, socializing your pet, preventing undesirable behaviors, and controlling unruly behaviors.

An easy, nonforce method for teaching obedience commands involves the use of small bits of food for training lures and reinforcements. Most dogs are very motivated to take food, so the best choice for a food lure is the pet's own dry food. If this is not sufficiently appealing, try small morsels of semimoist dog treats or freeze-dried chicken or liver. An excellent time to train the picky pet is just prior to its dinner time, since the dog should be hungry, more focused on the food, and quicker to respond.

You can use the food to lure the pet into the response you want as you give the command, and then the food will be given as a reward immediately following the response. One of the advantages of food lure training is that your pet will learn two cues for each command. In fact, as soon as your pet is responding to the food lure, begin to hide the food in your hand (or keep the food in your other hand) while you use the hand signal and verbal commands to cue the behavior and continue to give the rewards for success. Learning a double signal (verbal and visual) will make the pet twice as likely to respond to you. Once a behavior is learned, food rewards should gradually be used to get a longer, calmer, or more accurate behavior. You'll do this by picking only the best responses (e.g., best position, quickest response) to reward, and withholding food rewards for less exact responses during subsequent training sessions.

To help ensure that the pet learns with a minimum number of mistakes, avoid training when it seems overly energetic or has a shorter attention span. Work in a quiet area, keep the training sessions short, and stop before the dog begins ignoring commands. When the pet's response to commands becomes dependable, you can gradually take the training to environments with increasingly stronger distractions. Be patient, take your time, and make sure the pet knows one command well before proceeding to the next.

Your tone of voice is important. Use a happy tone of voice when teaching, "Come," "Sit," and "Down." An upbeat tone will help motivate the pet to move. Use a deep, commanding tone that is more likely to cause the pet to hold its place when teaching "Stay." You should avoid repeating a command over and over without getting a correct response. If you do this frequently, the pet will learn that it does not have to obey the first time you ask. Whenever you give a food reward, always say "Good dog." The pet will learn to associate the words with food and the words will eventually become a valuable secondary reinforcer to sustain the response as the food is gradually withdrawn.

Recall on command

This is a fairly straightforward command to teach. Say the dog's name so it turns and makes eye contact with you. Extend your hand toward the pet with a piece of food in it. Wave your hand with the food towards you and say, "Come" as the pet runs to you. Give the piece of food to it as you say "Good dog." Take a few steps back. Show the pet a second piece of food, say its name, and repeat the recall for food. The pet will learn two cues to come on command, a verbal cue and a visual cue. An alternate way to teach this command is to toss a piece of food so the pet moves away from you, then using your cues, call the pet back to sit, then repeat, gradually phasing out the food.

Sit on command

With the pet in a standing position, hold a small piece of food in front of its nose. In a steady, slow motion, move the food over the dog's head. The pet's nose will point up and the rear end will ease down to the floor, taking it into the sit position. Say, "Sit" as the rear hits the floor and give the food. Avoid holding the food lure too high over the head or the pet will jump up instead of sit. It won't be long before you'll notice that the dog

will go into the sit position when you sweep your hand in an upward movement, even without food. As soon as the pet learns this command, you should ask it to sit before it gets anything it wants. By doing this, you teach the pet that you have control.

Down on command

Begin this lesson with the dog sitting on a smooth surface. Quickly move a piece of food downward from in front of its nose to the floor directly next to its front paws. As the front end of your pet slides down to the floor, say "Down" and give the food. You must make sure that you keep the food on the floor close to the pet's paws. Otherwise it is likely to stand up and walk toward the food lure. Eventually, a downward sweep of your hand by itself will cause the dog to go into the down position. This command may take a little more patience and time than the first two. Only use the word "Down" when you are teaching this command. If you use the same word to tell the pet to stop jumping on people or to get down off counters and furniture, it may be confused about its meaning.

Stay on command

The "Stay" command is probably the most challenging command to teach a young dog. Don't even attempt to teach this command unless the pet is calm. A helpful strategy is to wear the dog out with a long walk or play session just prior to training.

Ask the pet to "Sit" without using a food lure. The second the pup sits, lean toward it, look it in the eye in an assertive manner, extend the palm of your hand toward it, and say "Stay" in a firm tone. Wait only 1 second, then calmly praise it while the pet is still sitting, give a release command, "OK," and hand it a small food reward. Repeat the command, adding a second to the stay following every five or more repetitions. Once the pet can stay for at least 20 seconds, you can begin working on distance. Ask the pet to "Stay," and take one step away from it. Gradually work from a 1-second to a 20-second stay at this position, then move back two steps and repeat the process. In no time at all, you will have the pet staying for longer periods at longer distances.

Common causes of failure to teach the "Stay" command include attempting to make the dog stay too long or at too far a distance too quickly, as well as attempting to get the response when the pet is too active or distracted. Try to anticipate when the pet will become bored with training and stop well before then. If the pet's eyes start to wander or it seems like it might move too early, calmly repeat "Stay" in a serious tone of voice, make strong eye contact, and lean toward it. Maintain the stay for just a few more seconds, and then quickly release the pet.

Heel on lead

The goal is to teach the pet to walk without pulling on a slack leash. Before training, try to wear the pet out with some aerobic play. The initial training should be short and held inside without distractions. Later, training can be moved to the yard, and then to sidewalks. If the pet is incorrigible about pulling, use a head halter for more control.

To get a young puppy used to its leash, put the leash on the pet and hold it loosely. Toss tiny treats on the floor one at a time ahead of the pup. Lightly hold the lead as the pup moves forward to eat each piece. Gradually apply a bit more tension on the lead. Repeat outdoors on the patio, deck, and in the yard.

Begin the heeling session by asking the pet to "Sit." Stand on the pet's right side, facing the same direction. Take the leash in your left hand, holding it about 500 cm (2 feet) from the pet. Show the pet a treat or toy held in the right hand. Say "Heel" and walk forward, keeping the pet's attention on the object in your right hand. Take a few steps, stop, ask the pet to "Sit" and reward it with the food or a pat on the head. Repeat, gradually taking more steps between each "Sit" command. Use an upbeat, animated tone to keep the pet's attention. Say "Heel" and reward the pet with praise and/or a treat whenever it walks along at the same speed and the leash is slack. If the pet begins to pull forward, immediately turn and walk in the opposite direction. When the pet catches up, ask it to "Sit" and repeat the above exercise. Once the pet does well in the home and yard, take the exercises to sidewalks in the neighborhood.

Other training options

Watch, wait, and reward

While proper timing of rewards is essential to teach the pet the desired behavior, food lures are not the only way to train. In fact, if you carefully and constantly watch your pet, at some point you'll see the puppy do the very behavior you want to reward (e.g. sit, lie down, or come). The critical issue is for you to reward the behavior immediately while the puppy needs to learn what behavior gets the reward. Therefore if a reward is given immediately and consistently every time the puppy does the desired behavior, and only when the puppy does the desired behavior, the pet will begin to repeat the behavior as soon as it learns what it needs to do to get the reward. At this point you can say the word (e.g., "Sit") just as the behavior begins. This teaches a command or cue to get the pet to start the behavior sequence that gets the reward. This same technique with immediate reward timing and repetition can be used for any behavior that you observe (come, lie down, go to your bed, drop it). For example, to teach a drop command you can follow your pet while carrying toys, and give a small treat each time the toy is released or "dropped" from the puppy's mouth. Add a cue word when you see the pet is about to drop the toy. Soon your puppy may be bringing you toys and dropping them just to get its reward, at which point you can move on to training another behavior with your rewards, such as lying down quietly or going to rest in its bed. However, for the pet to understand what behavior is getting the reward, focus on training only one behavior at a time until it is learned.

Clicker training

Another excellent way to reward desired behaviors immediately is to use clicker training, where a clicker is paired with a favored food treat. Once your dog knows that a click means that a treat is coming, you can watch closely until you see the behavior you want your dog to learn (repeat), and time the reward even more accurately by clicking as soon as you see the desired behavior and following this shortly after with a food reward. As with lure training, you can then gradually achieve more accurate responses by timing the reward for longer or better responses.

A little extra physical control – leash and head halter control

Another excellent way to help guide a pet into the behavior you want it to learn is to keep a leash attached to maneuver the pet gently into a sit, down, or come, which can then be immediately rewarded. Once successful, say the cue word just before you pull on the leash and very soon the pet should be doing the behavior with the word itself, with less and less need for the pull. Puppies and dogs that are excitable, easily distracted, or hard to get focused may respond better if a leash is used with a head halter to prompt the pet gently to get the desired outcome, e.g., sit, come. A leash and head halter or leash and front control body harness are particularly useful as aids in teaching the dog to walk on loose leash.

Regardless of how you get the desired outcome, the common element is to give the reward immediately each time you get the behavior until it is consistently repeated, and to add a cue word before the sequence so that the pet learns a word or command that is associated with the behavior so that the behavior will be repeated by the pet for a reward each time it hears the command (or sees the visual signal).