

Training Secrets for Bully Breeds

Teach your bully the basics.

By Elaine Waldorf Gewirtz

When it comes to living with a well-mannered bully breed, training him to follow a few basic cues makes all the difference in the world. An intelligent, loyal and eager-to-please dog can learn at any age, but the earlier you start, the sooner he will begin acting like a gentleman. Puppies and senior dogs can learn these basics as soon as you bring them home.

Reward-based training is the way to go, says Mary Harwelik, executive director of The Real Pit Bull Inc., an education and rescue organization (www.realpitbull.com) in Cranford, N.J., that focuses on American Pit Bull Terriers. "It's the most humane, stress-free way to teach dogs new behaviors, and pit bulls and related breeds do really well with this."

Clicks That Click

Clicker training — using a clicking device or other sound that marks the desired behavior with a food treat — works well with bullies. "It allows them to use their brains and exercise those mental muscles," Harwelik says. "Start with something simple, like saying 'watch me,' clicking, and giving your dog a treat when he looks at you. Besides a great bonding exercise, this helps your dog focus on you."

Think precise timing when using a clicker to train your bully-breed dog. Correct timing lets him know exactly which behavior you are rewarding. He will feel confused if you praise too soon or too late. With some practice, you can master the skill of good timing. Focus on what your dog is doing at the exact moment that you tell him "good dog." For example, if you give him a treat as he gets up from a sit, he will figure out that standing instead of sitting earns a reward.

"You can click faster than you can give your dog a treat, so it's easier to mark the desired behavior," says Marcy Setter, director of education and public relations at Pit Bull Rescue Central (www.pbrc.net) in Milford, Mass.

Consider these tips: Vary the tone of your voice when giving cues, as your dog loses interest if he hears the same thing every time. Keep training sessions short and fun. Limit sessions to a few minutes each, and gradually increase to 10 minutes or longer. It's OK to repeat sessions several times a day. If you feel frustrated while training, simply end the lesson with a happy attitude.

When using food with or without a clicker to lure or reward your dog into performing a new behavior, select moist and flavorful tidbits. These high-value treats should differ from your dog's usual diet, because they need to grab your dog's attention. Pieces of cheese, apple, hot dogs or chicken strips work well, while hard biscuit or dried packaged treats — known as low-value treats — are less exciting and take longer for your dog to chew. Cut or break them into 12-inch-long pieces so your dog can gobble them quickly.

Training your dog takes time, so remain patient and positive. If you feel frustrated, stop the lesson, but do not give up completely. With practice, praise and goodies, these intelligent dogs can learn anything.

Sit-In

Teaching your bully to sit is easier than it first might appear.

1. Start by putting a treat in your hand and holding it in front of your dog's nose.
2. Slowly move it over your bully's head — not too high, as this encourages your dog to jump for it.
3. Say your dog's name, followed by the cue "sit." Move the treat horizontally and parallel to the ground over your dog's head. When your bully moves into a sitting position, give him the treat.

4. If you use a clicker, click it and say “yes” in a happy tone of voice, and give your dog a treat. If he backs up, move into a corner and repeat the cue.
5. To release your bully from the sit position and to let him know that it's permissible to move, say “OK,” “all done,” “free” or another release word. Pet and praise your dog, too. After a few repetitions, he will begin to associate the word “sit” with receiving the food reward. Once your bully sits reliably on cue, randomly space out the rewards. This conditions him to keep working because he doesn't know when something yummy might come his way.

Stay, Stay, Stay

In an emergency, the stay cue can save your bully breed's life if he's escaping from your yard into a busy street.

1. Ask your dog to sit or lie down facing you.
2. Show a treat, and say “stay.” Some trainers also use “wait” interchangeably with “stay.” “I use ‘wait’ to prevent a dog from forging ahead and rushing out the door or into traffic,” Setter says. “It lets him know that we'll be moving in a few minutes.” Either cue works.

3. While your bully is sitting or lying down, say “good stay” in an upbeat tone of voice. After a few seconds, say “OK,” and give the treat. Withhold the reward if your dog moves before you say the release word.

Mealtimes provide great practice for the stay. Make eye contact with your bully, and say the stay cue before putting the food dish on the floor. Tell him “OK,” and let him dive into his dinner.

Increase the length of time that you ask your bully to stay, and gradually take a few steps away from him. This teaches your dog to maintain his position until he hears the release cue. Sit-stays should take one to three minutes; down-stays can last longer — about 10 to 15 minutes.

To maintain your bully's interest in training, keep lessons short, fun and exciting. Once he learns what you want him to do, add distractions, different locales and new behaviors to his repertoire. Soon, he will become a well-behaved bully and the envy of all of your dog friends.