

Popular Dogs: Tricks & Games

Begin your dog's training with the basic commands.

By Andrea Arden

Many people think of trick training as something exclusive to professional trainers. However, just about anyone with a healthy dog can enjoy the fun and benefits of teaching their dog tricks. The admiring “oohs” and “ahhs” from family and friends as they watch your dog show off its tricks is probably enough incentive to get started. But also consider the additional benefits: Trick training is one of the best ways to build your confidence in training and build your dog's confidence in you and itself—all while having a blast!

The Basics for Trick Training

No need to be intimidated. Even the most advanced and well-trained dogs used in movies and commercials start by learning the basic commands of sit, down, stay and come. Just as a well-built house has a solid foundation, a well-trained trick dog has a solid foundation of basic obedience. The basics are attention, sit, down and stay. Once your dog knows these commands you can move on to more advanced tricks, such as shake, wave, roll over, circle, bow, crawl, balance a biscuit and more!

Attention!

Attention is probably the most important basic obedience command. After all, it is unrealistic to teach any student (human or canine) that isn't paying attention to you. So, the first step in trick training is to teach your dog to pay attention to you by looking at your face when you say its name.

Without a doubt the easiest way to get your dog's attention is to control all the things it wants in life. That means making it clear to your dog that everything your dog loves so much—food, toys, attention, walks and play with other dogs—all come from you. If your dog wants any of those things it must be willing to do something as a trade. For example, if your dog wants to play in the yard, ask it to sit before you open the front door. If it wants an ear scratch from you, ask it to lie down for 10 seconds, then reward it with a good rub.

Once you have made it clear to your dog that you control what it wants, you are sure to find it pays a lot more attention to you and what you want. But, you should also teach your dog when you say its name, it means you want it to look at you and wait for further instructions.

Hold a treat in your hand and move it from the tip of your dog's nose swiftly up to your eye. This way your dog's glance follows the food up to your eye. Mark (with “yes” or a click from a handheld clicker) and give it a treat the moment it glances at you. Gradually increase the length of the glance from half a second to one second, two seconds, three seconds and so on, by delaying the mark and treat for those lengths of time.

When your dog holds your gaze for two or three seconds, say its name right before you move the treat up to your eye. This way, your dog will look up before you start to put a command on the behavior. After about 10 repetitions, you may start decreasing the obviousness of the movement of your hand to your eye. You are working toward having your dog look at you when you say its name, not just when you have a treat in your hand.

Sit and Down

There are a number of ways to teach your dog to sit and lie down on command. Two of the most gentle and effective ways are luring and capturing. You may use either one, but many trainers find that combining both methods is most effective.

Luring method: A lure (usually a treat or a toy) is an object that piques your dog's interest enough that it will follow it. For

instance, by holding a lure in your hand at the tip of your dog's nose, you can move your dog's body into many positions.

To encourage your dog to sit using the lure method, hold the lure at the tip of its nose. Move your hand slightly up and back toward your dog's rear so your dog lifts its head up and back to follow the lure. As it moves its head, its rear should go to the ground. It's like a seesaw—if one end goes up, the other goes down. If this doesn't work, ask for a sit with your dog's backside in a corner or against a wall to keep it from backing up.

Repeat this many times during three- to five-minute training sessions. When your dog is easily and reliably sitting in response to your hand movement, say the word "sit" right before you move your hand.

To teach your dog to lie down using the lure method, hold the treat at your dog's nose and move it straight down to the ground, then slightly toward your dog so it looks down and moves toward its front paws. If you move your hand too far in front of your dog, chances are it will stand up to follow it. When your dog lies down, mark (with "yes" or a click) and give it the treat. Repeat this exercise many times in three- to five-minute training sessions. When your dog reliably follows your hand movement into a down, say the word "down" right before you lure.

Capturing method: Capturing a behavior means rewarding any desired behavior that your dog offers on its own. You can teach your dog to sit using the capture method by waiting until your dog sits near you on its own and rewarding it for doing so. Chances are, it is likely to do so again as a way of getting another reward. Pretty soon, every time you take a step away from your dog, it will step with you and sit.

Once the behavior (in this case sit) can be accurately predicted (in this case, by you taking a step, then stopping), you can say a command word right before the behavior happens. For example, take a step and right as you stop say "sit" (because you know that is what your dog is about to do). At first, it will sit because it has learned doing so is rewarding. However, after you repeat the process of taking a step, and saying "sit" as you stop, rewarding your dog for sitting, it will start to make the connection between the word sit, the action of sitting and the reward. This connection will really sink in once you start ignoring sits your dog offers on its own and only reward those you request.

For the down command, the capture method can be used the same way, except wait until your dog lies down to reward it.