

Basic Cues

Teach your puppy the cues of sit, down, stay and come.

By Pat Miller

All dogs benefit from knowing at least these four basic good-manner behaviors: sit, stay, down and come. Here are tips for teaching these important cues.

No. 1: Sit

Every dog should learn to sit on cue.

n Hold a treat at the end of your puppy's nose.

n Move the treat over his head.

n When he sits, click a clicker (a handheld device that makes a click sound when pressed) or say "yes!"

n Feed your dog the treat.

n If your dog jumps up, hold the treat lower. If he backs up, back him into a corner and wait until he sits. Be patient. Keep your clicker handy, and click (or say "yes!") and give him a treat anytime he offers a sit.

n When he offers sits easily, say "sit" just before he offers, so he will associate the word with the behavior. Add the sit cue when you know you can get the behavior. Your dog doesn't know what the word means until you repeatedly associate it with the appropriate behavior.

n When your puppy sits easily on cue, start using intermittent reinforcement by clicking some sits but not others. Every click still gets a treat. At first, click most of the sits and skip an occasional one (this is called a high rate of reinforcement).

Gradually make your clicks more and more random. Like playing a slot machine, your dog will learn to keep working even when the payoffs are few and far between.

No. 2: Down

If your puppy can sit, he can lie down.

u Have your dog sit.

u Hold the treat in front of his nose. Move the treat down slowly, straight toward the floor (toward his toes). If he follows all the way down, click and treat.

u If he gets stuck, move the treat more slowly. Click and treat for small movements downward, such as moving his head a bit lower or inching one paw forward. Keep clicking and treating until he is all the way down. This is called shaping: rewarding small pieces of a behavior until your dog succeeds.

u If he stands as you move the treat toward the floor, have him sit, and move the treat more slowly downward, shaping with clicks and treats for small movement down as long as he is sitting. If he stands, cheerfully say "oops," which means "Sorry, no treat for that," have him sit, and try again.

u If shaping isn't working, sit on the floor with one knee raised. Have him sit next to you. Put your hand with the treat under your knee and lure him under your leg so he lies down and crawls to follow the treat. Click and treat!

u When you can lure the down easily, add the verbal cue, wait a few seconds to let him think, then lure him down to show him the association. Repeat until he'll lie down on the verbal cue. Then begin using intermittent reinforcement.

No. 3: Stay

What good are the sit and down cues if your puppy doesn't stay?

I While he is in the sit or down position, put a tasty treat in front of his nose and keep it there.

I Click and reward several times while he is in position, then release him with a cue that you will always use to tell him the stay is over. Common release cues are "all done," "break," "free," "free dog," "at ease" and "OK."

I When he will stay in a sit or down position while you click and treat, add your verbal stay cue. Say "stay," pause for a second or two, click and say "stay" again, then release.

I When he's getting the idea, say "stay," whisk the treat away (out of sight behind your back), click and whisk the treat back. Be sure to get it all the way to his nose, so he doesn't jump up. Gradually increase the duration of the stay.

I When your dog will stay for 15 to 20 seconds, add small distractions: shuffling your feet, moving your arms, small hops. Increase distractions very gradually. If he makes mistakes, you're adding too much too fast.

I When your dog will stay for 15 to 20 seconds with distractions, gradually add distance. Have him stay, take a half step back, click, return and treat. When he'll stay with a half step, tell him to stay, take a full step back, click and return. Always return to your puppy to treat after you click, before you release. If you always return, his stay will become strong. If you

call him to you, his stay will get weaker due to his eagerness to come to you.

No. 4: Come

A reliable recall — coming when called — can be challenging to teach. It is possible, however. To succeed, you need to install an automatic response to your come cue — one so automatic your dog won't even stop to think when he hears it but will spin on his heels and charge to you at full speed.

n Begin by charging a come cue the same way you charged your clicker. If your puppy already ignores the word "come," pick a different cue, like "front" or "hugs." Say your cue word, and feed him a bit of scrumptious treat, such as boiled chicken or a piece of hot dog. Repeat this until his eyes light up when he hears the cue word. Now you're ready to start training.

n With your puppy on a leash, run away several steps and cheerfully call out your charged cue word. When he follows, click the clicker. Feed your puppy a treat when he reaches you. For a more enthusiastic come, run away at full speed as you call him. When he follows at a gallop, click, stop running and give him a treat. The better he gets at this, the farther away he can be when you call him.

n Once your puppy understands "come," play with more people, each of whom has a clicker and treats. Stand a short distance apart and take turns calling and running away. Click and treat in turn as he comes to each of you. Gradually increase the distance until he comes flying to each person from a distance.

n When you're ready to practice in wide-open spaces, attach a long lead (a 20- to 50-foot leash) so you can gather him up if that bunny trail is too much of a temptation. Then go practice some more where there are less tempting distractions.

Remember, always keep it fun!