

Foundation Skills for Dog Agility

Make your dog an agility champ with these two essential foundation skills.

Terry Long

Foundation Shaping Skill #1

Materials: Clicker and treats

Behavioral Goal: Bow

What & How: You are going to use the technique of “capturing” to train your dog to bow (or stretch). This is a good way to teach your dog to offer behaviors that require him to control his body movement. First, simply watch your dog at those times of the day when he is most likely to stretch such as first getting up from a resting position. When he starts to stretch, click your clicker, and then give him a treat. Repeat every time you see him stretch and, soon, he will be “offering” the stretch to see if he can get you to click. Next, delay the click, thereby “shaping” a deeper stretch or a longer-duration stretch. Raise your criterion a little at a time until you get a deep stretch that he holds for at least five seconds. Add the cue when you like the full behavior by simply saying the cue (e.g., “Stretch”) just as he offers it.

Foundation Shaping Skill #2

Materials: Clicker, treats, and a flat target

Behavioral Goal: Nose Touch to a Target

What & How: You are going to use the technique of “targeting” to train your dog to touch his nose to a target, a foundation skill for teaching a stop at the bottom of the contacts. First, find something that resembles a yogurt lid. Hold this target in one hand and present it about two inches from your dog’s nose. When he glances or sniffs at it, click, and give him a treat. Raise your criterion a little at a time until he is firmly touching his nose to the target. Next, place the target on the ground and click and treat when he touches it. Make sure you deliver the treat close to the target, preferably between his front feet. Try and only click if he touches the target without moving any other part of his body. You don’t want to inadvertently reinforce him swinging his rear end around because this will cause problems when you transfer this to the A-frame or dogwalk. After getting a couple of nose touches each time, release him with “Break” or “Okay,” and move to another location just a few feet away and repeat. Add the cue (e.g., “Touch”) just as he offers the nose touch to the target on the ground without moving around.

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