

Understanding the Basics

Dog training should be fun; fun for your dog and fun for you. It should engage your dog's mind, allowing him to work toward and achieve that "light bulb over the head" moment, rather than being physically manipulated with hand or leash into a desired position. The latter strategy creates a dog dependent on its trainer/owner rather than a dog capable of initiating action on its own. Using the science-based method of positive reinforcement and motivational techniques helps create a wonderful bond between you and your dog. You both will want to work on learning more and more!



Important Dog-Learning Points to Know

Tapping into how a dog learns is easier than trying to fit your dog's process of learning into what we as humans are used to, or by using frequently used training methods because that's the way "it's always been done." We tend to drive the message home – as soon as the dog begins responding, rather than taking a break after a few good responses at the level we're working on, we keep going hoping to get to the desired result in just a session or two. A good trainer knows that the very opposite works! Too much repetition in one session is boring, so keep your training sessions short and end them on a successful note before the behavior has a chance to deteriorate.

Fast, fun, brief and frequent sessions is a scientifically proven method of successful training. It lays a foundation of enthusiasm for this challenging and fun "training game" you play with your dog, and gives him a great attitude about training in general. This translates to your dog enthusiastically paying attention to see what you want him to do next. Dogs trained this way quickly go into "training mode" after you've taught them a behavior or two; they really enjoy the training game!

Visions of Sit

Before you start teaching your dog something, sit down and think about what you want the behavior to look like. For example, if you want to teach your dog to sit, think about the logistics – do you want him to sit right in front of you, sit where he is, or sit across the room? Or would you like him to do all of these? Think about the specifics of what you want the command to mean. For sitting on command, I like to teach the sit-from-across-the-room kind of sit, one where my dog comes and sits right in front of me, one where he sits at my side, and yet another where he sits in front of someone else. They are all handy and fun commands that you can teach separately using a basic sit as a foundation (a basic sit

is when your dog sits somewhere in front of you, close by). Think about the fun you can have tailor-making your dog's commands to be something unique for just the two of you, or simply stick with the basics and have a clear idea in mind of the desired result.

Break It Down!

Remember when you were learning how to tie your shoes? What a complicated, frustrating endeavor! We knew there were certain steps to get it done, but if we didn't do them in the right order or correctly we'd have to undo the whole thing and start over. Now, it's something we could practically do in our sleep but we learned it by doing just the first little bit of it and mastering that step before going on to the next.

Just apply this same methodology to dog training. Teach your dog a small bit of the beginning of a behavior in brief, fun sessions, mastering that step (see the "10 out of 10 rule") before moving on to the next small step. Creating the base of the shoelace bow just right is necessary, or the whole bow eventually falls apart. If you read the "[Sit](#)" handout, you get a good idea of how to break down a behavior into small parts, laying solid groundwork for a gorgeous, fast and first-time-you-ask sit.

People Training First

Train in short, fun and frequent sessions, ending the session on a good note with your dog having made some progress. Stop and wait 15 minutes, or longer, before the next session. I often have my clients train an imaginary dog so they can work on their motor and timing skills before training for real. Moving quickly through the paces is very important to keep your dog's focus and enjoyment level up, as well as facilitating the learning process. What better way to do that than to work on your own skills first? It's pretty funny at first but there is always improvement in a handler's skills with this exercise. It teaches the importance of not engaging your dog until you have a clear vision of what you want to train at that moment. It also takes having back-up plans into consideration in case everything doesn't go perfectly as planned. For example, if you're training Misty the dog and something falls over and scares her, what should you do then? Call her over right away, praise her for coming and then start again. Be prepared with contingency plans!

OK, you've read the "Sit" handout and have a good idea about training by approximation – little steps, one at a time – and have learned how to use food in the early stages of training and you quickly go to random reinforcement in the first session. How do you know when your dog's ready to move to the next step? Make sure you have the proper foundation at each level of training by using the 10 out of 10 rule. Before moving ahead with the next increment of training for any command or trick, be sure you get 10 out of 10 ideal

responses for the current level. Just be sure to keep the training sessions short – you can have two or three sessions while working on your 10 out of 10.

This may seem like a lot, but think about it – as you’re training a behavior, you’ll see improving responses. If you go on to the next level after just one or two great responses, his idea of that command still includes all the different responses he’s given you. He hasn’t yet received enough rewarded repetitions of the great response he gave you.

Remember, even though you’ve raised the criteria for your dog to receive a reward in training sessions, you’ve still rewarded various approximations. So why shouldn't he give you any response he’s been rewarded for? When your dog’s ready, be fair by ending a step with numerous repetitions of the great responses.

As both you and your dog’s skills improve, and you’re moving through a session at lightning speed, you can get more repetitions per session because your dog has now learned that focusing on you is the most fun thing going on, and dogs really enjoy (and learn faster/better with) speedy training. We humans move slowly and inconsistently in a dog's eyes.

Now that your dog’s well-trained to do a certain command, each time you ask for it, require the response be the great one before any reward (play session, belly scratches, praise, etc.) is given. If you ask your dog to sit and he just wiggles his rear end and looks at you, rather than asking again simply walk away. This is part of the training – he’s learning that he can’t “cheat” sometimes and have it be OK with you. When you go back to him again in 10 minutes, he’s much more likely to sit by the time you’re pronouncing the “t” in “Sit!”

You’re the best judge of your dog’s abilities and best at knowing when your dog has given his most on a particular behavior. If you’re not training for competition don’t be concerned with perfection. Work toward your dog’s best (and safest) response. If he’s a natural at certain things, like fetching items, start with putting that behavior on cue so that in the initial stages of training it’s easy for him, thereby setting him up for success. Consider your dog’s training history, age, health and temperament when deciding how small to break down the bits of the behavior and what end result you want.

Note: Training handouts are written by i Love Dogs’ consulting trainer, [Eugenia Vogel](#), who has more than 20 years experience as a professional dog trainer and behavior consultant as “Canine Coach.” For more questions about canine behavior, visit i Love Dogs’ [Ask-A-Trainer](#) section on [iLoveDogs.com](#)!

Photo Source: “Sweetie with i Love Dogs ball” by Donna Lee for i Love Dogs, Inc.