

Sit–stay exercises

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Sit–stay exercises

Sit and stay exercises are designed to teach your dog to focus attention on you for direction, in order to receive behavioural cues.

Principles

- Tiny food treats are used for positive reinforcement.
- In some cases the use of a headcollar and lead may be useful.
- Begin practising in a familiar area with minimal distractions. As your dog learns the task at hand, vary the location. Finally, add distractions.
- Initially, plan several short sessions over the course of the day. As you progress, sessions may vary from 5 to 15 minutes.

Stage 1: Reward attention

1. Stand directly in front of your dog.
2. Show the treat to the dog, ask the dog to 'sit', give him/her the treat.*
3. Show the treat to the dog, say 'sit and stay', count to 2, reward with the treat.*
4. Repeat, randomly varying the count from 1 to 10 during each session.*

* Reward your dog if he/she sits quietly and looks directly at you. During initial lessons, you may use the treat to lure attention to you.

- Throughout the lesson, encourage your dog to relax by repeating the word 'relax'.
- Your dog should remain in the 'sit' position until you calmly but clearly release him/her with a word such as 'OK'.

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Stage 2: Reward relaxed attention

During initial sessions, your dog may be excited about earning treats. He/she may bark, or offer you other behaviours he/she has learned.

- Try to ignore any barking or pawing. Wait quietly; withhold the reward until he/she offers you the ‘sit’ as instructed.
- With repetition, the dog will begin to understand that the only way to earn a treat is to sit calmly and watch you. You may notice subtle relaxation of your dog’s body posture. Reward these postures.

Stage 3: Add distance and distractions

Once your dog can consistently sit–stay and quietly watch you for 10 seconds, you are ready to ask him/her to stay as you move away.

1. Stand directly in front of your dog.
2. Ask your dog to ‘sit and stay’ while you take a step away and return. Give a treat.*
3. Repeat the sequence, randomly varying the distance. Return to the dog and reward with the treat.*
4. As you progress, add some distractions such as clapping your hands, knocking on the floor or bouncing a ball.
5. Finally, walk to the door, and then knock on the door. After each event, return to the dog and give the treat.*
6. Alternate randomly between challenging tasks and simple ones.
7. Always end your lesson on a positive note. Pick an easy task such as a series of 1-second ‘sits’.

* Reward your dog if he/she sits quietly and looks directly at you.

Stage 4: Add challenging distractions

Sit–stay exercises can be used to manage many problem behaviours, including jumping up on guests and running after bicycles. The dog’s reaction to these triggers can be reduced, but the process must be gradual.

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Begin a lesson far enough away from the trigger that the dog is able to sit and stay. A lead and/or headcollar should be used for control, but this should not be a struggle. Use very delicious treats.

Example: Sit–stay to control jumping up on guests (this exercise should not be attempted until the dog has mastered the sit–stay while a family member walks to the door, opens and closes door, and returns to the dog).

1. When the guest enters the house, the dog should be restrained by lead (and headcollar) several feet from the door, out of the path of the visitor.
2. The dog should sit and stay to earn high-value treats.
3. Keep the dog's attention, rewarding quiet behaviour, while guests settle.
4. Maintain the sit–stay for several minutes. Do not release the stay until the dog has relaxed and is not attempting to look toward the guests.
5. Once the dog is calm, he/she may be released to greet the visitors.
6. Guests should pet the dog only if he/she sits quietly.