

Canine Conduct

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10 Hot Behaviours to Train in the LOO!

There are so many wonderful things you can teach a dog while heeding nature's call. Let's face it: we all have to visit the loo regularly, so it's a built-in opportunity to use the time to teach or refine wanted behaviours. It's an ideal environment: small, quiet, you're the most interesting thing in the room, and of course, it comes with a built in seat! Here's a few things I've taught my dogs in the bathroom. I'm a clicker trainer, so I tend to use a clicker, but it's not necessary. Use a verbal "marker" like "YES!" said crisply and quickly to "mark" that exact moment when the dog did something you want to see repeated. Follow up with a treat. You can keep treats on your bathroom counter---I have used soft cat food like "Pounce" which comes in a cardboard can with a plastic lid. Others come in foil resealable packages. I do vary the treats, but always keep some "stable" there all the time.

1. The "EYE CONTACT GAME." Teaching your dog to "check in" with you without asking! This develops "muscle memory" in the dog, and reinforces that "making eye contact" with you is a good thing to do, because good things happen when the dog does this. Soon, it becomes a habit, and the dog will automatically "Check in" and give you eye contact consistently. You can then make the eye contact game become also a "Name Game". If the dog learns that each time he hears his name, it means to stop and look to the person calling that name, then you'll have less worry about him bolting across a busy road and getting hit when he hears his name called. The calling of his name does not mean "come", but "STOP AND LOOK AT MOM!" He'll listen for the *next* cue word which will tell him what to do. His name, by then, will mean "Stop, look, listen to human for cue of what to do next." The next cue might be "Sit" or "Down" or "Come" or "Back." His name is his cue to look to you for the next cue. His name only means "give human the attention." One way to teach the eye contact game I particularly enjoy (I think originated with Chris Bach, but I've been unable to confirm this) is to hold your arm out in front of you, as you sit on the Loo, at shoulder height, with a really good treat in your closed palm. When the dog stops focusing on the treat in your hand and looks up at you, click and give him a treat. Repeat several times. Move your hand up, down, side to side. Repeat, and each time the dog stops focusing on the hand full of treats, and makes eye contact with you instead, CLICK or give a verbal "YES!" and give him a treat. Once you can hold out your arm and the dog instantly makes eye contact, you're ready to add his call name just before you click or "mark the moment" with some type of verbal marker. This will pair his name with giving you eye contact in his mind. Be careful not to reward moving toward you, only looking at you. Be very accurate in your clicking or verbal marking and catch him just as the head swings to you and the eyes touch yours.
2. "TOUCH" or "TARGET" with nose game Grab an object close to you. Say, an ink pen. Roll up a wad of masking tape into a little ball, and shove it on the end of the pen. Rub something smelly-good the dog really likes on the end of the tape ball. Hold the object (called the target stick) out in front of you. Wait for your dog to come sniff it. When he extends his neck to sniff,-- while he's moving toward that ball, CLICK or say "YES!" and treat. Repeat several times, and begin altering the height of the stick randomly. Hold it a few inches higher, lower, to the right, to the left. Turn around, do it in a different direction. Take it into other rooms, and practice getting the dog to touch the tip of the ball in each direction you face. Broaden your movements, slowly pulling the target stick across the room as your dog follows, as if a magnet were pulling him. Why this crazy behaviour? It's easy! It's fun! Dogs LOOOOOVE it! And it is the base, most important behaviour you can teach for quickly learning many advanced behaviours down the road. You're teaching muscle memory now to your puppy. Teaching him to target and move with the target. This is also



really helpful to keep the dog working for the CLICK instead of being lured with the food. Food is great, and it is a great lure, used properly. But, often unskilled handlers tend to over-lure, fade too slowly, and the dog has the real opportunity to become treat-dependent, or overly focused on the food. You can use this to teach many new behaviours: sit, down, crawl, finish, front,--all behaviours a puppy is perfectly capable of offering. But first, you have to teach him to target that stick. It will take very little time to do this! It's one of the most fun games of all for beginning dogs. Work on really rapid reinforcement, a phrase you'll read here a lot. This means, right after you click and treat, immediately hold the stick out again and let your dog move to it. Click and treat. Move your body a little bit. Repeat.

3. "THE SIT GAME" Go to the bathroom and sit down on the built-in seating. Close the door. Sit looking at a magazine or otherwise just ignoring your dog. Wait for dog to stop pawing at you for attention, to tire out just a bit and put his hind quarters on the floor. The moment that butt hits the floor, click and give him a treat from the pile you have on the counter. After treating, go back to ignoring dog. Watch from peripheral vision and as soon as dog starts to sit,--(and he will. You're the most distracting thing in that tiny room and you're pretty boring when you're ignoring him)--CLICK while he's on the way down. You want to clearly mark the moment for him to remember that SITTING is what is making you click and treat him. Or you could do the same thing with "Down". Just pick any behaviour he offers and start to "shape it", by clicking when it happens. Do it on the couch watching TV, do it in the kitchen making coffee, do it in the bathroom, the bedroom, outside on the porch. Out in the yard. Extend the time he holds that position by holding off on the click just a second or two at a time. It adds up quickly. Extend the time and add a distraction by taking a step backwards before you click (release) and treat him. Say nothing. Don't coach the dog verbally or with your body language. Let the clicker speak. It will. If you add body language and verbal or expressive coercion, you are also teaching your dog to watch your body for cues of what to do next, and dog's are masters at reading human body language and verbal tone. You, the teacher, have to become nearly "invisible" and let the clicker be the "bridge", not your raised eyebrows, your leaning shoulders, your wiggling fingers or twitching lips. This is one of the most effective ways of getting a longer and more reliable behaviour (sit-stay, down-stay, stand-stay, etc.)--just neutralizing your body language and letting the click (or verbal marker) speak for you.
4. "LICK YOUR CHOPS!." (lick lips on cue) Get a dab of peanut butter and put just the tiniest bit on your dog's nose. When he licks at it, click and deliver a treat. Repeat. Once he begins offering the behaviour without the peanut butter, you can begin to attach the cue by saying "Lick Your Chops" just before you click, as the behaviour is happening.
5. "LEAVE IT" (leave food or any object and look to you for direction) Start with two piles of treats: one really high-value pile, like liver bits or cheese, and one low-value pile, like dog biscuits or plain cracker bits. Put the HIGH valued treats on the counter or tank top. Hold the LOW value treats in your hand. Hold out your hand to the dog. Let him mug it and just keep your fingers closed around the treats so the dog can't get any. The moment he backs off, looks away, or ignores the treat even for a moment, click and give a treat from the back of you, the really good high powered treats. Repeat this until each time you hold your hand out with the low value treats, the dog quickly ignores them and looks to you or steps away or looks away. This is what many clicker trainers call "Doggie Zen", meaning the dog learns to give something up he values to get something of even better value. Work toward opening your hand up to expose the treats, and having the dog ignore your hand. He turns away, you click and give a GOOD treat. Move your hand to different heights and repeat the exercise. Put a high valued piece of treat in your hand. Be ready to close your fingers if the dog mugs at your hand. As soon as dog looks away, click and give a couple really high powered treats from the table in back of you. When the dog is



routinely ignoring the treats, add the cue word "leave it" just before you click, just as the head is turning away from the hand full of treats. When the dog is responding to the cue word, start lowering the low value treats to the floor and repeating the exercise. Add a high powered treat to the pile you are asking the dog to ignore. Build up to all high powered treats. When this is reliable, put treats on pile on floor and walk dog by it on leash, cueing "leave it" just before you get to the treats. Reinforce the moment the dog looks away with a click and treat.

6. **WAVE (with paw)** I like to shape this behaviour by using a target stick. I hold the target stick out to the dog, down low, and click for any paw action. I gradually move the target stick further and further away from the dog, as I gradually lift the stick up higher and higher. Finally, I fade the stick and use my finger. This can also be gently coerced by tickling the hairs on one of the dog's feet, and when he moves the foot just a bit, click and treat. Repeat rapidly until the dog starts to pick up his foot without prompting by the tickle. He will. Keep reinforcing the foot lift, gradually and incrementally clicking at the highest part of every lift. Once dog is lifting paw each time at chest height, add cue word "wave" or "high five" just before clicking, while the paw is in the air.
7. **BACK UP (move backwards)**. When dog is in front of you, lean toward him. Catch the first step he makes backwards, and click and treat. Gradually build up steps, a step at a time. Add cue once dog is reliably quickly moving backwards when you start stepping forward. This is a great behaviour to teach just as you are getting up off the throne.
8. **PAW THWAK**. Teach your dog to touch an object, like the side of the bathtub or the trash can, or some type of object you are holding in your hand--- perhaps a book, a plastic coffee can lid, etc. Hold the object out to the dog and expect that if the dog has been taught nose targeting, he will instantly offer that behaviour to earn his reinforcement. Ignore it. Don't pay for nose touches this time: it's a new game, and the dog needs to learn what the rules of the game are. In a few seconds, not getting reinforced for nose touching will make the dog just a bit frustrated, and he will offer something else interactive with the object---quite often, it's some kind of paw action. Don't look for complete behaviours, like the dog picking up his paw and actually touching the object. You may well have to back up, reinforce any kind of movement with a paw. You can click and treat for shifting weight from one leg, or the slight lift of a leg, just build slowly anything to do with foot movement. Once the dog realizes it's PAW ACTION you are paying for, he'll find creative ways to use those paws. If you're holding out an object, most likely he will attempt to touch it with his paw. This is the moment you have been waiting for: be ready for it. You want to "catch" this behaviour before the dog offers the raking of the paw and nails, which inevitably comes after the paw thwack. What you're looking to reinforce is a soft, firm but steady touch, building up in time that the dog holds his paw quietly on the object. This behaviour, incidentally, can have lots of practical applications, too! You can teach your dog to close the cupboard doors, to flush the toilet, to alert you to sounds, etc. by touching you with his paw.
9. **DOWN**: If you like luring, you can teach your dog to down using a treat quite easily, while you're sitting on the throne. When the dog is in a sit position in front of you, bring a treat towards his chest, and slowly move it downward, allowing the dog's nose to follow the treat. As the treat gets near the floor, pull it toward you just a bit, and the dog will probably automatically stretch out and go into a down position. This is the moment you have been waiting for! Mark that moment with a click or a verbal marker. Make it really clear to the dog what he did that's earning the marker and the treat: belly to the floor. One other fun way to teach this is to get down on the floor and cock one knee up into a tunnel. Make it just high enough that the dog can't walk through, but must "belly down" to scooch through the opening. You're waiting for that one moment when the dog's belly hits the floor. At the exact time that happens, CLICK or say "YES!" and offer a treat on the other side of your leg, so the dog remains in that position while eating the treat. Once the dog is



going belly down each time you sit on the floor and cock up your knee, in anticipation of moving through that tunnel to get his treat, it's time to attach the cue word to it. Say the cue word "DOWN" JUST AS THE DOG BEGINS TO FOLD DOWN---you want to catch it as it's happening, so the dog can clearly connect the word with the behaviour. Then add your click or marker immediately after the cue words, and again, deliver the treat while the dog is in the down position.

10. SPIN: The loo is usually a tiny space, but normally big enough that a large dog can turn around just fine (think crates, and how easily a dog can bend around inside them). With a small dog, you can teach a spin on the hind legs, and have lots of room for adding creative touches, even. Use a target stick or just a treat to lure the dog's nose upward, and then move it slightly in a circle---just a quarter circle or so, not the whole thing. As the dog begins to move and follow the treat, click and give him the treat. The click tells him that following the target or lure is what is wanted, and what is being rewarded. Build slowly into a half circle, then 3/4 of a circle, and finally a whole circle. Once the first circle is learned, start backing off on the hand movement, and make it a bit more subtle. Your goal is to have a hand signal that is very unobtrusive, but one the dog can easily understand. Think stirring your coffee with your finger. You wiggle it in a tiny circle. Once you have the dog circling, you can add height---getting the dog to do it on back legs only. And you can do it in a different direction. If your circles are always clockwise, start tossing in counter-clockwise circles. Back up on your expectations when you change direction: you may have to teach it all over again, since dogs don't really generalize this sort of thing easily.

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