

## Capturing Your Dog's Focus

Before you can attempt any training you need to start with your dog paying attention to you. These exercises are good for any dog regardless of age and level of training. Don't skip over this step in training. Your dog needs to know that he will be reinforced highly for noticing you and maintaining focus. Show your dog that you can be as interesting as his environment! Understandably, this can be a challenge to achieve when you eventually need to compete for attention with other dogs, squirrels, people on bicycles and the like, capturing your dog's attention!

### *Should you ask for focus?*

Do not ask for focus at this early stage. Capture and reinforce it when it's offered. Be ready to reinforce at all times and don't let opportunities pass you by. Use the clicker and primary reinforcement, such as a treat. If they are not available, use verbal reinforcement and praise, petting and play. Let your dog know you like it. Don't ask for focus; you want your dog to think it's his idea. Otherwise, you might have to nag and correct, which you want to avoid. This is very important when introducing agility obstacles. We don't want to fight to maintain focus. We want them to offer it on their own. You get more of what you reinforce.

Reinforce small attempts and pay off well in the early stages. As your dog gets the idea, require longer duration of focus (up to 30 seconds) before reinforcing. As your dog becomes successful at this in quiet places like home, add new environments with higher distractions. Raise the requirements only when you have success at that level. Increase the difficulty in tiny steps and raise your criteria slowly.

### *Nothing in Life is Free*

Making yourself central to the eating process and you'll make yourself very important to your dog. Don't give meals or treats for free; it's a waste of valuable training opportunities. We should control the resources and become the source of the goodies.

Get down to your dog's level (sit in a chair for big dogs or use the floor for toy dogs) and hand feed.

- ◆ No grabbing or stealing is allowed.
- ◆ Dog needs to wait until the verbal release is given, "Ok".
- ◆ Use a non-reward marker to indicate your dog did not respond in an appropriate way, such as "Oops" given in a calm neutral tone.
- ◆ If dog tries to grab food, close your hand that is holding the food and wait for your dog to back off. Just wait. Don't say anything else. If dog is not sniffing, pawing, or trying to get the food, open the hand. If he is still not attempting to grab it, pick a morsel out of your hand and give it to him. Anytime he tries to grab food, close your hand.
- ◆ Hand feeding allows us to use each bit of food as a reinforcer for focus. Do this for as much of the meal as possible. Think about taking part of each meal and using it throughout the day for rewarding behavior. This reinforces good behavior and keeps the dog from gaining weight by not getting extra treats!

Another exercise is to place food on the floor in front of the dog and cover it with your hand. Wait out all the pawing and scratching that might occur, reward any backwards movement, or head turn away from the food by clicking and picking up the food and giving it to the dog. Eventually you should have a dog that watches food on the floor very intently, but makes no move to take it.

As SOON as you see the dog turn his head away, pick up and reward. Gradually extend the time that your dog is left in front of food.

Another very useful exercise is to place the dog in a sit and very slowly offer a treat from above his head. If the dog moves in any way, you reverse your hand, as soon as the dog is still again, you turn your hand over again and the treat carries on moving towards the dog. The dogs very quickly learn that if they want the treat, they must stay still and as long as they do so, lots of rewards arrive. The benefits are two-fold, the ability to reward your dog IN PLACE. A dog moving as food is presented can be the cause of many problems with start lines - if the handler goes to reward the dog in place and the dog is rewarded for lunging for the treat, it can cause difficulties further on. Secondly it once again emphasizes that you are in control of the food. Do remind students to give a cue that tells their dog when it's OK to take the food.

From there it's a short step towards balancing a treat on the dog's nose until the dog is cued to take it. This is a trick that goes down well in many families, besides being a useful opportunity to enlist the help of the rest of the family in maintaining the dog's self control.

When looking at toys and many other forms of reward, such as chasing and hosepipes the best form of control is to teach the dogs that all of these things are available to them if they ask for permission.

A fun exercise to do in class is to get a series of plates and load them with bait, or if you have a ball mad dog, place tennis balls on them. Get the dog on a short lead and hold him just out of reach of his hearts (or in the case of gundogs, stomach's) desire! Most dogs will try all sorts of things such as pawing, stretching necks, lunging. Eventually they realize that they are getting nowhere and at about this stage, most dogs also remember their patient handler and they will glance around. AS SOON as they make eye contact, the handler clicks and gives permission to take the toy/or food. Very quickly you'll have a dog that glances at what's on the floor and then watches his handler. When the dog is reliably looking for permission, the handler can begin to occasionally reward from their pocket with food or toys and walk on past what's on the floor. Once that's accomplished, it's a short step to asking more of the dog before permission is given, or the handler rewards and soon you have dogs that will do a complete round of agility with food and toys all over the floor. Remind handlers that this type of exercise should never be turned into a series of failures for the dog. As with all the training that we do, they should keep a close eye on their rate of reward, start small and gradually build to longer duration behaviors.

#### *Crate Manners*

Your dog's crate give him a place to rest, recharge, and be "off" for a while. In the beginning, reinforce your dog entering his crate. Sit with an open crate, a clicker and a pile of treats. Shape the behavior of entering the crate by rewarding small steps: Look at crate, move towards crate, one paw in crate, two paws in crate, etc.

You can leave your dog with a toy in his crate, such as a stuffed Kong, especially in the beginning.

You should expect your dog to wait for your verbal release before leaving his crate. This is for safety and control issues. If he rushes to get out, close the door. Start small.

- ◆ Open door one inch and give release and reward; then open wider and wider. The reward can be something fun that happens when he leaves his crate. It does not have to be a treat.
- ◆ Don't give any verbal cue to wait or stay. You are waiting for your dog to figure out what you want. You want a thinking dog. You can also add a sit before leaving the crate as part of the requirement, but again, wait for him to offer it; do not ask for it.
- ◆ If dog is noncompliant for 30 seconds, use a non-reward marker ("Oops, maybe next time") and turn and leave for 10 seconds. Then come back and start again.

After your dog leaves the crate you should require him to focus on you. Reward this.