TEACHING YOUR DOG TO BACK UP

Why teach your dog to back up?
Believe it or not, most dogs aren’t consciously aware of their back legs, so let’s give them some help. There are many reasons to teach your dog to back up or walk backwards and hind end awareness is pretty high on the list. Your dog’s awareness of his rear end is not only important for skills in agility (jumping, contact behavior, weave poles), but also for living a healthy life. A dog that can consciously control his back legs is less likely to trip and fall, is less likely to put undue stress on his spine and front end and will learn to improve strength and stability through the hip joints. This is also important in the later stages of life. The more you do NOW for our dog the better your dog will be later. Plus, it’s a cute trick!

How to train the skill.
1. First we must have a dog that desires to work for us so load up on some really yummy treats!

2. Stand in front of your dog with your dog facing you, hands either together up by your chest or behind your back, and simply take a step or two toward him. Be on the lookout for ANY rear leg movement. If the dog moves a rear foot IN ANY WAY, click and treat. Good dog! Have a party! Praise amplifies the value of the food reward, so make sure he knows he is doing a good job. This is a difficult skill.

The first few times can be a bit tricky, so just stay with it. If there is no movement just keep moving into your dog; he will have move in order not to fall over. As soon as the rear legs move, click and treat. Again have a party and be generous with your praise and treats!

3. Continue walking “into” your dog, clicking and treating for rear leg movement until your dog starts to “get it”. You will know when he has understanding because he will begin to take more steps backward. You will begin to see a more fluid and consistent movement with a better rhythm. When this starts to happen hold off on your click and treat until he takes 2 or 3 steps back. When your dog seems confident, begin to ask for more steps before you click and treat.

4. When your dog is consistently offering 5-7 steps back begin to fade out the “walking into your dog” part. This transition takes time and can be a challenge, so we will lower our requirements to earn a click and treat. Standing in front of our dog, take a step forward. Your dog should respond as this is nothing new. Then INSTEAD of taking another step forward (like we have in the previous steps) shift lots of body weight into your front foot. If there is ANY rear leg movement click and treat. This weight shift produces the same “pressure” to move your dog that stepping into them did, but now we are starting to fade your physical proximity.
TEACHING YOUR DOG TO BACK UP (continued)

5. When your dog starts to “get it” then you can slowly begin to ask for more steps before the click and treat.

6. When your dog will consistently take 4-5 steps back with you only taking one (or none) then it is time to add your verbal cue. BEEP BEEP BEEP is super cute (like a delivery truck backing up)

TRAINING TIP: Remember this is a process. Many short training sessions scattered throughout the day are better than one long session. If you are getting frustrated you may be asking your dog to progress too quickly.

TRAINING TIP: We want your dog to be successful! If he fails to earn his click and treat three or four times in a row, you might be progressing too quickly. Go back to a place you KNOW he will be successful and build from there.

TROUBLESHOOTING PROBLEMS

Sitting: if your dog keeps sitting down instead of backing up give yourself a pat on the back; you have a dog that puts a lot of value on sitting politely for a treat. That’s not a bad thing! To teach your dog to offer a different behavior make sure you deliver the treat BEFORE he sits so he begins to understand that the reward is for something other than putting his bottom on the floor. If you are too slow with your reward, no worries, just take another step toward your dog and wait for another step backward... And try to be quick with your reward.

Backing crooked or to the side: if your dog is walking to the side it just means he needs a little help with his “steering”. It would be like a person needing help backing a big long truck into a small parking spot. Sometimes we just need help. The idea is to keep the dog directly in front of you. If the dog is backing away from you and veering off to his right take a step to the side and see if you can get him to steer back on course. This takes some practice on the part of the handler as well as the dog. In the beginning of the training process, don’t focus so much on the straightness of the backing, concentrate on just the backward motion. Later on, when your dog understands that you want him to back up you can work on a straight path.

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