



*A non-profit that educates
and supports dog owners*

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TEACHING YOUR DOG TO SIT-STAY AND DOWN-STAY

Two of the most important behaviors your dog can learn are to sit and stay and lie down and stay when told. You can use these two behaviors to control your dog when he is unruly, in the way, or overly excited. It is impossible for a dog to be jumping on visitors when he is on a sit-stay or for him to follow you around anxiously when he is on a down-stay. These behaviors are useful tools in working with many kinds of behavior problems.

Teaching Sit

Rather than pushing and pulling your dog into a sit or down position, we prefer a method that prompts your dog to do the behavior on his own. This procedure uses a prompt or lure, which is then used to reward the behavior. The “lure-reward” is something your dog wants, most often a tidbit, that entices him into a particular position and then rewards him when he gets there. Find a treat your dog really loves. This could be a training treat, cut up hotdogs, boiled chicken or cheese.

To get your dog to sit, put the treat between your thumb and first finger, and hold the treat in front of your dog’s nose. Slowly move your hand backwards so your dog must raise his head to keep it in sight. As your dog raises his head, in order to keep his balance, he’ll naturally lower his rear and sit. When this happens immediately give him the treat to reward the behavior. Thus, you can see why it’s called the lure-reward. If your dog pops up to get the treat, don’t give your dog the treat. Instead, close the treat in your hand, draw your hand back and then again lure your dog into sitting. Continue to withhold the treat until your dog remains in the sit when you are giving him the treat. Do NOT say “sit” at this stage in your training.

At first, your dog will likely try a number of behaviors to try to get the treat. He may paw at your hand, jump up on you, or bark. Each time he does, hide the treat briefly, then bring it out again and continuing luring him into the sit. Avoid saying “no”, reaching for your dog, pushing on his rear, or pulling on his collar. Just be patient and give your dog time to figure out that sitting is the only behavior that will cause you to part with the treat.

After a few attempts, your dog should be sitting fairly reliably when you hold the treat over his head. At this point, you can begin to say the word “sit” as you present the lure but before your dog starts to sit. Don’t be tempted to start saying “sit” before your dog has gotten the idea of what to do when he sees the treat. If you are saying “sit” while your dog is pawing at your hand for example, this will only confuse him. Avoid repeating the word “sit” over and over. If your dog is still trying a lot of other behaviors, it may be too soon to add this cue word. If your dog hesitates, just withhold the treat until he sits rather than repeating the word.

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The “lure-reward” method uses something your dog wants to entice him into a particular position and then rewards him when he gets there.

The next step is to fade, or gradually make the lure less visible, so your dog is responding to “sit” rather than the appearance of the treat. If you don’t complete this step, your dog will only sit when you have a treat. Fading the treat is done in a series of steps, such as:

1. Rather than showing your dog the lure, hold it in your fist-he learns he can still get the tidbit even if he doesn’t see it.
2. Hold the treat in your other hand, or pull it from your pocket, or even have someone else give him the treat (as long as he still receives it immediately)-your dog learns not only does the treat not need to be visible, it can even come from somewhere else.
3. Your hand movement must also be faded. Say “sit” and hesitate a second or two to see if your dog will respond without also needing to see the movement of your hand. Don’t wait too long at first. If your dog doesn’t sit, make a small movement with your hand, and reward the sitting response.

Hand movement can be faded as follows:

Rather than bringing your fist all the way to your dog’s nose, only move it half way.

Continue decreasing how much you move your hand toward your dog until you are making only a slight forward movement. Finally, stop all motion of your hand.

If your dog fails to sit as you are fading the lure, you might have tried to fade the lure too quickly. If that happens, back up a step, and add another intermediate step in the fading process. After you say “sit,” be sure to hesitate a second to see if he’s going to do it without the lure. If you don’t completely fade the lure, your dog will only sit when he sees the food, or when he sees your hand move.

Teaching Lie Down or Down

This follows naturally from the sit. Lure your dog into a sitting position first. Next, slowly move the treat to the floor, and curve it around behind one front leg. You may need to experiment to see if your dog more easily follows the treat if you move it to his right or his left. As he turns his upper body to follow the treat, gently push him onto the opposite hip with your other hand. He’ll end up in a more relaxed position if he’s lying on one hip rather than on his breastbone. As soon as he’s lying down, let him take the treat from your hand.

Don’t get frustrated with your dog in the initial stages. Let him figure out what will get him the treat. He may begin to paw at your hand or bark at you. It may take four or five tries or a minute or two until you can get him into the down position. Some dogs do better if you move the treat straight down, to a position between their front legs, and then slowly drag it forward. Your dog will be more likely to end up in the “breastbone position” with this method, and you may need to gently push him over on his hip.

If you both are really “stuck,” then reward your dog for following the treat even part way. With each succeeding step, require him to follow it just a little further, so that you are rewarding incremental progress, or “baby

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reliably, you must
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steps,” rather than requiring him to get all the way down before being rewarded. This approach will prevent your dog from giving up because he isn’t getting his reward.

If your dog isn’t too big, you may also find it helpful to sit down with your legs in front of you, slightly raised to form a bridge. Lure your dog under your legs. He’ll have to lie down in order to get under them. A coffee table also works well for this.

Initially, do not say “down” as you lure your dog. However, when he is reliably lying down in response to the lure, say the word “down” as you present the lure but before your dog starts to lie down.

Pick your cue word carefully for the down. You cannot have “down” mean both lie down and “get off” or “don’t jump.” Most people find it easiest to say “down” for lying down, and “off ” for getting off of the furniture or people. If he already knows “down” to mean get off, use another word for lie down such as “floor” or “drop.”

As with the sit, you must also fade the treat, and fade your hand motion in a series of steps. Refer to the section above on sitting to see how to do this.

Teaching Stay

Once your dog is reliable at sitting or lying down (he can do it ten times in a row with no delays or errors) you can then begin to teach him how to hold that posture for any length of time. To encourage your dog to hold both “sit” and “down” longer than momentarily, begin to add a delay before giving him his tidbit after you get him in the position you want. Don’t use the “stay” command yet, but just use a hand gesture—palm open and facing your dog. This puts a small natural barrier between you and him and encourages him to stay put. If you have already faded out the treat, begin using it again as you teach the stay command. You will fade it out as with the sit and down commands as he gets better at staying.

Teaching “stay” requires extreme consistency, and a release word that tells your dog when he can get up. Stay will have no meaning to him if you don’t make it clear when the “stay” is over. For a release word, pick a word that you don’t use with him regularly so he doesn’t get confused. Many of us use “OK” in many different situations around our dogs. Using OK as a release word may confuse your dog. You might want to pick a word your dog doesn’t hear very often—the word “release” or “free” are possibilities as are foreign language words or non-sense words.

In order for your dog to stay reliably when you tell him to, you must practice in many different locations and in the face of many distractions. Start with very easy situations with very few distractions and then gradually, in very small steps, progress into more difficult situations where there are many distractions. Always make it easy for your dog to do what you want him to do, and don’t progress too quickly.

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If your dog breaks his stay before you have released him, immediately put him back on his sit or down stay (don't reward him) and then have him do a stay that was shorter or easier than the one he just broke. You want him to have a success right after his failure. Do the easier stay several times then progress back to the more difficult one he failed to complete successfully.

As with any training, practice makes perfect. If you have difficulty, find a qualified trainer to help you, read the Pamphlet for Pet Parents on Choosing A Dog Trainer or Behavior Consultant.

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