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Teaching Basic Commands

Dog friendly, reward-based training method

For teaching the basic commands we use dog-friendly, reward-based training methods where the behavior, that we wish to establish in our dogs, will be rewarded and undesired behavior is mainly ignored.

The advantages of this training method are:

- A. the dog understands what you want from him straight away,
- B. it is a lot less stressful resulting in a faster learning process and,
- C. the dogs will experience their training sessions as fun,
- D. it leads toward happy confident dogs that eagerly obey their owners even outside the training sessions and off leash.

Some rules to follow before starting to teach the basic commands

1. **Always get the dog's attention before giving the command.** The absolute basic for all obedience training is having the full attention of the dog. Without this attention it is impossible to get an obedient dog!
2. **Using a gentle, but firm voice.** Dog's ears hear many times better than human ears. Therefore, when shouting out the commands the dog will often receive this as very unpleasant, resulting in a slowed-down response, or worse, in a scared dog.
3. **Using a re-inforcer.** A re-inforcer can be a short word, such as "YES", or you can use a clicker, which is a small box with a metal plate that gives a clicking sound when pushed in. A re-inforcer is ALWAYS followed by a reward.
4. **Using the right reward.** The easiest and quickest reward is the food reward. But also a retrieve game, tug-of-war, a pet on the shoulder or head or a soft praise are rewards. It is up to the owner or trainer to find out what the dog likes most at that particular moment. Because the kind of reward also depends on the situation of the moment. When training with lots of distractions the usual reward often does not work well anymore. Then stronger rewards are needed.
5. **Avoiding distractions as much as possible.** When teaching a new command an area is needed with as little as possible distraction. This can be the back garden or a room in the house. Once the dog starts understanding and responding to the command a start can be made in other areas where there is more distraction.
6. **Deciding what you wish the dog to learn.** Before each training session decide what you wish the dog to learn. Teaching too many new commands in one training session will only confuse the dog, resulting in a slowed-down learning process.
7. **Using the step-by-step method.** Teaching the dog step-by-little-step the commands will be more clear to the dog, instead of wanting the commands to be perfect immediately. This results in a quicker learning process in the dog.

8. **Stop when the dog gets confused.** When noticing the dog becomes confused (it may start sniffing the ground, scratch its ear, yawn or lays down instead of coming or sitting) do not become upset or think the dog is stubborn. It just does not understand what you mean. This is the right moment to STOP the exercise, sit back and think about what went wrong. What did YOU do making the dog confused. If you go on when the dog is confused, or worse, you get crossed with the dog, it will go into stress. And stress slows down the learning process. It also will remember this very unpleasant moment the next time you try to teach the same command, making it unwilling (read: scared) to perform. Therefore, it is better to take a short break and continue later.
9. **NEVER use aggressive training methods.** Choke chains, pinch collars, electrical collars, but also shouting screaming and jerking at the collar are all actions of aggression, made by owners and trainers who lack the sufficient training skills, understanding of the dog language and, above all, patience. All these actions make the dog follow the command too, finally. But now it learns through avoiding the correction. It will be under continuous stress, always being on the alert of avoiding another punishment of its owner/trainer. It certainly will not lead to a happy and confident dog that fully trusts and respects its owner/trainer.

The timing of the click (or “YES) is of uttermost importance. And the click (or “YES) is ALWAYS followed by a reward, such as food-reward, play or petting. In this way, it is possible to teach a dog all the basic commands in a very short time. The speed of learning depends on the breed, the individual, the history of the dog and whether the dog respects and trusts you as being his leader or boss. Once the dog knows the basic commands you can continue to shape the performance of each command in a more precise and faster respond. Although, this fully depends on whether you are planning to continue training your dog for some kind of dog sport or that you are satisfied with your dog as being a well-behaved pet.

The Exercises

The SIT exercise

The SIT can be taught in two ways. The first method is each time when the dog sits voluntarily, no matter where, you give the SIT command then you re-inforce and finally you give the reward. The other method is by using a piece of food or tit-bit, as shown in picture 1:

Picture 1: Teaching the command SIT

The dog is in the standing position. You hold the tit-bit just above its head. As the dog reaches for it you slowly move it above and behind the dog's eyeline. As a reaction the dog will raise its head in order to follow the tit-bit and automatically go into a sitting position. Right at that moment you say ‘YES’ or you click. Only after the re-inforcer you will give the tit-bit (= reward).

When the dog understands to follow your hand, you repeat this exercise but this time without any tit-bit in your hand. Once the dog sits each time you raise your hand above its head, you introduce the command. Now, at the moment the dog goes into the sitting position you first say “SIT”, then re-inforce followed by the reward. The dog only will fully understand the command when it follows the command without the hand signal.

The DOWN exercise

The DOWN is taught in a similar way as the SIT. As for the voluntary way this time the dog should lay down in stead of SIT. Then follow the same steps as described under the SIT exercise. Also the other way is similar to the SIT exercise, although now the dog is in the sitting position as you can see in picture2:

Picture 2: Teaching the DOWN command

You hold a piece of food above its head or in front of its nose, then slowly go straight down with the tit-bit to the ground with the dog's nose following your hand. When the nose touches the ground you slowly move forward with your hand and the food. In order to get the food the dog will lay down. At that moment you re-inforce and give the food. When the dog understands to follow your hand, you repeat this exercise but this time without any tit-bit in your hand. Once the dog lays down each time you point down with your hand, you introduce the command. But now before you re-inforce you will say the command DOWN, followed by the reward. The dog will only fully understand the command when it follows the command without the hand signal.

The STAND exercise

Also here you can re-enforce the dog's natural behavior, meaning you use those moments the dog stands by itself. The other way is when the dog is in the SIT position (see picture 3).

Picture 3: Teaching the STAND

You squat down next to the dog and hold with one hand a tit-bit just in front and close to its nose. With the other hand you push up the dog's belly gently. At the moment the dog stands up you re-inforce and, then give the reward. You continue this exercise until the dog stands up by itself as soon as you hold your hand in front of its nose at nose level. Only then you introduce the STAND command in the same way as is described under the SIT and DOWN exercises.

The STAY exercise

The command STAY means in fact nothing more than 'remain in the last given position until I tell you otherwise'. In fact this command is a bit superfluous, because whether you give the SIT, DOWN or STAND command, the dog should also remain in that position until your command otherwise.

Picture 4: Teaching the STAY

Usually you start teaching the STAY from the SIT-position. From the SIT position the dog can much better follow where you go and feels, therefore, more secure resulting in a quicker STAY.

While standing next or in front of the dog and holding your hand up, as shown in picture 4, you command 'STAY'. After only 1 second you re-inforce followed by the reward. Once the dog gets the point you slowly increase the time to 2 seconds 3, 5, 9 15, 30 etc. You also increase the distance between you and the dog. First you do one step away from the dog, then 2, 3, 4 etc. and you move around the dog. However, you do not move behind the dog until

it clearly responds to the command. This same method you can apply when the dog is in the DOWN- or STAND position. The dog has fully understood the command after he stays at least one minute with you out of sight.

The HEEL exercise

Before starting the heel-exercise you should get the dog's attention, as shown in picture 5. Once you've got its complete attention you do one step forward. The easiest way is to have a food reward visibly in your hand, approximately at the height of your face. Most dogs automatically and enthusiastically will follow while looking up at you (or the reward). Once he puts one paw forward you immediately re-inforce this step and then give the reward. However, if he loses attention you start again, but this time while you do the step forward you call the dog's name too or you use a squeaky toy.

When the dog gets the point you make more steps before re-inforcing and rewarding. Build this up slowly until you can 'heel' the dog for at least 15 steps. Then you can start building in corners. First big round corners; the better the dog heels the sharper the corner becomes until you can do 90 degree corners to the left, right and right- and left-turns.

Picture 5: Teaching the HEEL

The recall exercise with the frontal SIT

This exercise should be divided in two and well the 'recall' exercise and the 'frontal SIT' exercise. Once the dog performs both exercises well you can put them together into one whole exercise.

The recall can be taught in several ways. For example: you can use each opportunity when the dog comes voluntarily, whether it comes for attention, for food or for a play. At the moment you see the dog coming you call its name and command, in an happy and excited tone of voice, 'COME'. For making yourself less threatening to the dog (especially sensitive dogs and puppies respond well to this) you squat down and spread your arms in an inviting way, as shown in picture 6. Once the dog has come you re-inforce while making a great fuss of it before giving the reward. Do not force the dog into the frontal SIT, just reward the coming.

Picture 6: Calling the pup while squatting down and spreading the arms

Another method is when you have the dog (in the beginning on leash) in the SIT-STAY or DOWN-STAY. At a certain distance, not too far, you call the dog. Also this time you can bend over, maybe clap your hands, while calling him in a happy and exciting voice. In this way the dog will learn that it is fun to come to you.

Separate from the recall exercise you practice the frontal SIT. For this you place the dog in the SIT position and position yourself in front of the dog, resulting in your dog sitting in the frontal SIT position. You command gently 'PRESENT' or 'FRONT', re-inforce and reward the dog for sitting correctly before releasing him. Once the dog understands what is expected from it you can do one step back before calling him into the FRONT position, then do two steps back and finally 3 or 4 steps. For each correct performance you re-inforce and then reward.

When the dog performs both exercises happily and readily you can combine them into one exercise. First you call the dog 'COME', when the dog has reached you at about 3 steps distance you gently command 'PRESENT' or 'FRONT'. If everything goes well the dog should position himself in the frontal SIT followed by your re-enforcement and the reward.

Picture 7: Teaching the recall with frontal SIT

The FOOT exercise

This exercise is in fact the ‘finishing tough’ of the recall exercise or the retrieve. Arrived back in the frontal SIT position, after you have called him (or when he retrieved an obstacle) , the dog is asked to return to the heel position at your left knee side. Ideally, the dog should pass close to your right leg, stay tight to your body as it goes behind you and sit to heel exactly with its shoulder at your left knee, as shown in picture 7:

Picture 7: Teaching the FOOT

The dog is in the frontal SIT position while you show a food-reward visibly in your right hand. You move your right hand behind your back with the dog following your hand, or actually the food-reward. Behind your back you transfer the food-reward into your left hand and guide the dog around to your left side where the dog is ordered to sit, followed by the re-enforcer and then rewarded by the tit-bit. Once the dog understands this trick you introduce the command FOOT at the moment you start leading him around with your right hand. But only once the dog sits at your left side you re-enforce and reward.

We wish you good luck and lots of fun while training your dog!

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