



Behavior and Training Department Training Exercises

Attention

Attention is central to our relationships with our dogs. With a dog that is making the wrong choices around other people and animals, it becomes crucial. Attention is also a two-way street. You can't have communication without attention. If your dog's attention is on you, he can't engage in conflict with someone else. If your attention is on him, you'll know when he needs direction in order to prevent problems, and when you need to reinforce him in order to strengthen his focus on you. If your attention isn't on him, he'll be more likely to give up on you and make his own choices. You won't know what he's doing until it's too late to either reward good behavior or prevent unwanted behavior. If it's rewarding to look at you, your dog will look at you more often; if it's not, he won't.

Following are six steps that will increase the attention your dog pays to you:

STEP ONE Building Awareness: This is a big one, because it sets the groundwork for everything that follows. Observe your dog, especially the direction of his eyes. From certain angles, you will be observing the direction of his forehead. Notice when he makes the decision to look at you, however slight it may be, and also when he looks away. You're going to need to become expert at catching those moments as they occur.

- Make a game of it - for a 15 to 30 minute period at least once a day, reward him every time he looks at you. The point of this game is for you to become aware of your dog's attention, and for your dog to learn that looking at you can produce a reward.
- If he doesn't watch you at all, make sure you are starting in an environment where you are the most interesting thing available to him. You can also move away from him, or do some "accidental" interesting thing, like making a funny noise or moving in a strange way. Most importantly, make sure you aren't missing his attention because your focus wanders, or because you are expecting too much and missing what he's actually giving you. The trick is to cultivate the ability to watch your dog without obviously staring at him the whole time.
- One time you may have success is dinnertime. Make his food, put it on the counter, and wait until he stops staring at the food and drooling long enough to glance at you. Instantly pop some food, which you, of course, have ready in your hand, in his mouth. If you have the time, you can feed him his whole meal this way. Eventually, your dog should learn to watch you and wait for permission to eat, although you may have to use a body block at first when you put his food down.
- If he doesn't look away from you at all, raise the level of difficulty by moving into a slightly more challenging environment, like going from your kitchen to your picture window, your house to your yard, or from your yard to a walk somewhere reasonably calm.
- Once you have gotten good at observing his attention, you can add your marker word to it - as always, timing is everything. Work on delivering the marker word at the exact moment that he begins to direct his attention to you, and always follow with a treat. Remember that your marker word is his "snapshot" of what you want, and if it comes at the wrong moment, then you may be giving him a "snapshot" of something completely different than you think.
- Give him a "jackpot", (five treats in a row), whenever he chooses to look at you instead of something distracting like another dog, a person, etc...Watch for any head or eye motion towards you in that situation, because if you reward it, it will be likely to increase; but if you miss it, he will be more likely to redirect his attention somewhere you don't want it to go.

STEP TWO Putting it on cue, or the "head snap": The goal now is for your dog to respond to his name with immediate attention to you. If your dog is being pushy, hyperactive, or unfocused, a tie-down can be used to narrow his options, after you have made sure that there's no other problem.

Method 1) If your dog is already giving you reasonably good attention, you can simply start in a low distraction environment, say his name, and mark his attention with your marker word and treat as before. Say his name only once each time, and then wait. Practice this in short sessions throughout the day, varying the location. If this method does not work for you, go to Method 2 or 3.



Behavior and Training Department Training Exercises

Method 2) If it's difficult to get his attention, or if he doesn't look at your eyes, you can hold a treat to your forehead. Have another treat ready in your other hand, hidden from your dog. When he looks at the treat on your forehead, mark it and pop him the treat from your other hand. As he gets the idea, shift the treat away from your head. Each time you move the treat farther, you may have to wait a bit before he realizes that it's still the same game. Don't worry, just wait him out. If he doesn't get it, you can always back up.

Method 3) This method is a bit esoteric, and requires excellent timing, but I have found that it can produce more of an "ah ha" moment for the dog about actually looking in your eyes. I have found it to be helpful with dogs that have inhibitions about doing that. Hold a treat on either side of your head, beside your eyes. Watch his eyes carefully - they will probably be going back and forth between the two treats. At the instant that his eyes cross your eyes, mark it and pop him a treat. Gradually increase the distance between the treats, eventually moving them out of sight.

STEP THREE: Adding duration: Adding duration is relatively simple.

- Wait a second before giving the marker word and treat. Your dog should hold your gaze until you give him the treat. If he is successful for 15 repetitions, add another second the next time. If he is not quickly successful, back up.
- At this point, you can add a command such as "Buddy, watch me". His name should still bring his attention to you, but before you add motion distractions, you can teach "Watch Me" as well. The reason for teaching the dog "Watch Me" is that his name is often followed by another command. Some of the distractions you will use later will come from you; therefore, I find that having a specific command helps the dog to know that the movements you are making are not directions for him. In the case where you are specifically looking for his attention for its own sake, it gives you a name to identify that behavior.
- Lastly, if I want to remind my dog to watch me while we are working together, I don't want to over-use and "tire out" his name.

STEP FOUR Adding distractions from your own hands, and walking attention: This step is used to make sure that your dog is not distracted by incidental movements from your hands, and to introduce him to movement distractions.

- At this stage, you can add "uh-uh" in order to help cue your dog, because it can be confusing for the dog to see what appear to be conflicting signals from his owner.
- The movements from your hands can include moving the treat about and moving your hands without treats, (be careful not to move them in a manner similar to your hand signal commands).
- You can drop treats, but make sure that your dog does not get them. Step on the treat if necessary. You can make the treat that you are going to give your dog more obvious at first, to help your dog ignore the dropped treat.
- You can also squeak a toy or throw a ball.
- You should be able to eventually pass a treat under your dog's nose, over his head, up and down next to him, and hold it to his nose and draw it away without causing him to break his gaze.
- You can also add slight back and forth motion of your body - your dog should learn to track you with his eyes.
- As usual, back up if your dog is not succeeding. Either make the new challenge easier, or return to the last step and end with success.

STEP FIVE: Adding distractions from the environment. Use your very best treats for this! If your dog has two or three favorites, use them all. You'll need someone to help you at this stage, although you should also find other controlled environmental distractions. These environmental distractions should always be below the threshold level of your dog. For example, it could be a dog behind a fence, or a horse in a paddock, but it would have to be at a distance at which your dog was comfortable enough to succeed.

- When using another person, here is a list of some distractions which they can provide. Keep in mind your dog's particular strengths and issues, and choose with success and safety in mind.
- Approaching without looking at your dog and standing nearby.



Behavior and Training Department Training Exercises

- Approaching and reaching a hand in the direction of your dog.
- Approaching and saying hello to your dog in a calm voice. Make sure that they do not use the dog's name.
- Using a more excited voice.
- Offering a treat to your dog that is of less interest than the treats you are using, or offering a treat to your dog that is of equal interest to your dog than the treats you are using. In either case, they must make sure that the dog does not get the treat from them.
- Passing a treat in front of your dog, or as if to lead your dog's head away.
- Walking by with a ball.
- Bouncing a ball.
- Squeaking a toy.
- Walking quickly or running by.
- Squatting, skipping, lurching, dancing, doing jumping jacks, or otherwise moving strangely past you. Do not let your dog feel threatened, however.
- Approaching with another dog. As usual, keep in mind your dog's threshold level.
- Walking quickly or running with the other dog, or having the other dog spin or jump. If your dog can't handle this, don't do it! It may be that sufficient distance will make it possible, but you don't have to use every suggestion here.
- Making strange noises.

STEP SIX Use all of the distractions that work for you, but have your dog in an attention walk: I find that the dog will react very differently if the person approaches from my side or the side on which my dog is walking. You can also have the person standing still, with or without an additional distraction, such as food held out, and pass by them. Again, it will probably be easier for your dog on one side than on the other.

Note that these steps are just a list of suggestions - use only those that work for you and your dog. It may be that you only find a couple of suggestions here that work for you, or you may use the whole list. Be creative.

Keep it fun for both you and your dog. The goal is simple - increased attention between the two of you.

Sarah Mullen
Instructor, Behavior and Training