

Critters corner presents:

12 General Rules for Training Dogs

Section: Rules You Should Know

1. Training should be an enjoyable experience for you and your dog. If you are not in the right mood for training, don't even start. Keep training sessions short, on the order of 5-10 minutes, to maintain your dog's motivation.

If your dog doesn't respond appropriately to a command after several attempts, don't reward him. Resume training a few seconds later using a simpler command. Return to the more complex task later.

Always end training on a positive note. Ask your dog to respond to a command you know he will obey. Then reward him for a job well done and issue a finish command such as "free" or "release." Avoid common words such as "okay." Following a training session, both owner and dog should be left with a feeling of accomplishment.

2. Every dog should be familiar with the basic obedience commands, including come, heel, sit, down and stay. Teaching your dog to sit-stay and down-stay off leash is also a valuable lesson. Additional commands that are useful include: leave it, give it, stop it, and enough or cease.

Keep in mind that a dog's motivation to respond to a command decreases as the complexity of the task increases. The odds of success, hinge not only on the degree of sophistication of the task but also your dog's motivation to respond. From a dog's perspective the question is, which is more rewarding, chasing the squirrel or returning to the owner? Understanding this aspect will increase your patience and chances for success.

3. Training should not involve any negative or punishment-based components. There should be no yelling, no hitting, no chain jerking, no hanging, and absolutely no electric shock. Each session should be upbeat and positive with rewards for jobs well done.

Remember that the opposite of reward is not punishment; it is no reward. If you ignore unacceptable responses, your dog will not be rewarded for his failed response. Most dogs want to please their owners or, at the very least, to obtain highly valued resources (food, attention and toys).

4. Ensure that your dog's motivation for reward is highest during a training session. If food is the reward, train before a meal, not after. If praise, petting and other aspects of your attention are to be used as a reward, schedule the training session at a time when your dog hungers for your attention (for example, after you have returned from work).

For complex tasks, such as the off leash down-stay, your dog will be more motivated to comply if he has received moderate exercise before the training session. Asking a dog that is bursting with energy to remain in a prolonged reclining position is asking for failure during the early stages of training.

5. Make sure the reward you offer in training is the most powerful one for your dog. Food-motivated dogs work well for food, but the treats used should be favorite foods for the dog, such as small pieces of cheese or freeze-dried liver. You want your dog to be strongly motivated to obey commands to receive the treat.

Food treats, if used, should be small – no bigger than the size of your little fingernail. The texture of the treat should be such that it does not require chewing and should not crumble, otherwise you will lose your dog's attention as he Hoovers up the crumbs. Large treats, like Milk Bones®, take too long to eat, causing the dog to lose attention.

If praise is used as a reward, deliver it in high singsong tones, which are most pleasing for the dog. Also, enthusiasm in your voice will be much appreciated. If petting is to be used as a reward, it should be in a way that the dog enjoys, such as stroking the dog's hair on the side of his face in the same direction that it grows, or scratching him on the chest. Note: Petting on top of the head is not appreciated by most dogs.

6. Timing of the reward is important. After a correct response, reward your dog within ½ second of the command to ensure that your dog makes the connection between his behavior and the reward.

7. Use short commands such as sit, down, leave it, quiet, out, and off. Say the word once. Do not repeat the command. Dogs will remember a command for about two minutes before the notion is lost. Shorter words are better than longer words and words that end in a hard consonant (C, K, T, X) are better than those that end in a vowel because you can "spit" them out.

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The only command that should have three sounds associated with it is COME. In this case, you first have to attract the dog's attention by saying his name, ROVER, then COME (the actual command word) and GOOD BOY, even before the dog comes so that he knows he is not in trouble. Make sure your tone is crisp and cheerful.

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8. Put your dog on a leash and attract his attention so he looks directly at you and you at him ("Watch-me"). Then issue an action word, SIT. A poorly trained dog might slowly get into the sitting position, at which point you reward him IMMEDIATELY with praise, GOOD BOY, ROVER, (remember the high tones and heartfelt deliverance) and at the same time as you immediately produce the reward.

An untrained dog will have to be assisted into the sitting position by moving a food treat over and above his head so that he has to sit to reach it. Successful accomplishment of the task is met with warm praise and the food treat. In some cases, placement techniques (tension on collar, downward pressure on the rump) may have to be used.

9. Once you have a dog performing the desired response greater than 85 percent of the time in a quiet undisturbed environment, you can move onto the next stage; starting to shape the behavior toward the ideal response. You might begin by rewarding a progressively faster SIT, that is, rewarding the dog for sitting in 3 seconds, later in 2 seconds, and ultimately in 1 second, or immediately.

Decide before you give the command what you are going to reward. You can also start to reward longer and more definite SITS so the dog has to do more than just touch his rear end on the ground to receive reward. Withhold the food treat until the dog is sitting properly and then gradually introduce a time delay before the reward is given.

10. Gradually increase the length of time the dog must remain in a SIT-STAY until he can remain relaxed in this position for one minute while the owner is at a distance of 5 feet. Continue to increase the time and distance the dog is asked to remain in a SIT-STAY after the dog has been successful at the previous level for 5-10 trials.

For very long SITS, the reward should be given intermittently throughout the SIT, at least during training. The owner should teach a key phrase such as EASY or STEADY to teach the dog to associate relaxation with the exercise. It also is helpful to have a release command, such as FREE or RELEASE, which tells the dog when he has been obeying for the desired period of time.

11. Vary the commands during an individual training session – keep the training sessions short and frequent. Dogs will learn much more from regular short sessions than from longer, less frequent ones. Once the dog has learned several useful commands on the continuous reward schedule, that is, the dog is rewarded for each successful performance of the behavior, the schedule should be changed to one of intermittent reward.

Initially, the dog may be rewarded two times out of three, then every other third time, and so on until rewards are only supplied occasionally. This is the way to wean a dog off food treats and is the cure for a dog that "will only work for food." Remember, however, it is always important to praise your dog immediately if he has performed a command properly, whether or not any other reward will be forthcoming.

12. Once training has been accomplished in a quiet area, you can gradually begin to work in environments with more distractions, continuing the training in the yard, on leash, progressively lengthening the leash between you and the dog and finally dropping it, so the dog is now obeying without you at the other end of the lead. It may be helpful to continue this training in relatively busy environments, so that you can maintain control even in distracting situations. The Holy Grail of training is to have the dog reliably obeying commands off lead, even when other things are going on around him. This level of training can be achieved but only after a lot of hard work and investment of time. It's something to strive toward.

And remember, regarding training, "Art and science aren't enough; Patience is the basic stuff." (Konrad Lorenz).