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Teaching ATTENTION / EYE CONTACT

This is an essential foundation behavior for all other training. Voluntary attention to you paves the way for teaching all other skills.

Here are the basic steps. Do plenty of repetitions at EACH step, and only progress to the next step when your dog is ready for more of a challenge. If your dog seems bored, use higher value food treats.

Note: if not using a clicker, just use a verbal marker instead, such as “Yes!”

TURNING & LOOKING AT YOU WHEN YOU SAY THE DOG’S NAME ONCE:

- Begin inside your home, with little or no distractions. When your dog is nearby and happens to be looking away from you, call his name once in a *normal* tone of voice. When he turns his head to look at you, immediately click and then toss him a special little treat. (You could also throw his favorite toy occasionally if he really loves to retrieve.) Repeat this in different parts of the house, at various times of day. After a bunch of repetitions, your dog is going to become very happy to turn and look at you. After all, nice things always happen when he focuses on you! (Remember, this is not a “come” exercise – you will just be rewarding the dog for turning and looking at you when you say his name.)
- If at any point the dog does NOT look at you when you say his name, there is no punishment, the dog just loses that particular opportunity to earn a reward.
- Now, gradually start working on this exercise when the dog is further away from you, and then with MILD distractions. When the dog is happy to continue focusing on you each time you call his name, increase the difficulty *gradually* by practicing around more interesting distractions.
- When the dog readily looks at you when you call his name even if he had just been barking at something through the window (or something else that is VERY distracting to the dog), you are ready to take the training outside.
- Begin in the backyard, or another familiar area with low distractions. For some dogs, you may have them on leash at first, to limit their options. Remember, if he doesn’t look at you when you say his name ONCE, you can passively wait him out. Do not nag him repeatedly with his name. Let the dog figure out on his own what behavior is going to “work.”
- Intersperse freedom to do his own thing with practice on this exercise. Gradually increase distance and distractions.
- When the dog is consistent about looking at you whenever you say his name, go to new areas (down the street; in a neighbor’s yard; in a relative’s house; in a pet store parking lot and eventually inside the store; in a park, etc.)

EYE CONTACT THAT IS GIVEN FOR FREE – WITHOUT CALLING THE DOG’S NAME:

Another exercise to work on is QUIETLY waiting for the dog to give you eye contact FOR FREE – in other words, without you asking for it. If you regularly click & treat eye contact that is freely offered, the dog will be more likely to offer this behavior in the future.

- Begin inside with no distractions. When your dog looks at you, click & treat.
- Practice in various rooms. Add distractions bit by bit.
- Take the training outside. First your yard, and then to new locations, gradually increasing distractions.

LIFE REWARDS FOR ATTENTIVE BEHAVIOR:

- When you get ready to let the dog out into your fenced yard, or when you are about to take him for a leash walk, stand by the door and wait QUIETLY until he looks directly at you. The moment he looks at you, tell him what a good dog he is and immediately open the door.
- When you have the dog's food bowl all prepared, stand in front of him QUIETLY and wait for him to give you eye contact. When the dog looks at *you* instead of the bowl, place the bowl on the floor and let him eat.
- Hold a favorite dog toy or treat with your arm extended out to your side. Wait for the dog to give you eye contact, and then give the treat, or toss the toy as a reward.
- If you use a crate for your dog, wait for him to be calm and give you eye contact before you open the door.
- Show the dog a yummy treat (or favorite toy) and then place it on an elevated surface where he CANNOT reach it on his own (like the counter or a mantle) and stand nearby. When the dog finally gives up staring in the direction of the treat/toy and looks at you instead, click and give him the treat/toy.
- During leash walks, when you come to a stop, do not start walking again until the dog gives you eye contact. For most dogs it is very rewarding to continue moving forward, so teach the dog that walks continue only when he pays attention to you.