

Focused Attention Exercise

Life is full of distractions, especially for a puppy or dog! The focused attention exercise, developed by expert trainer Linda Newsome, is ideal for handling your dog around other dogs. This moving exercise works better than standing still. You teach the dog to give you eye contact when you say the dog's name. Very soon, you can get and hold the dog's attention anytime you wish. With attention--eye contact and movement--on you, the dog simply has no ability to pay attention to anything else at the same time. It's a great way to be in complete control of your dog--especially when combined with a head halter until the dog is totally reliable.

The first requirement for using the focused attention exercise is to find a setting where you can provide your dog with a safe personal space. Don't ask your dog to give you full attention and ignore everything around the two of you unless it is safe to do so. Part of what makes this work is for you to become someone the dog can trust to look out for safety. A dog whose experience builds the expectation of having to always be on guard has good reason to be distracted or aggressive.

1. Have treats on your person (later you may use a toy instead, but it helps to start with tiny, tempting treats - lots of tiny pieces), but keep them out of the dog's sight. To initiate the attention sequence, say "[Dog's Name]!" and YOU MOVE ABRUPTLY away. If you want to say "heel" or "come" or "front" or "by me," that's fine too. The main thing is, say the dog's name - this is going to become the cue for the dog to give you eye contact - and then MOVE.
2. When your dog moves with you, quickly PRAISE. This is when you would use a clicker if you wish, but a word of praise is fine, too. Then instantly whip out a treat and give it. Do not show a treat until you are ready to give it. This prevents the sight of a treat from becoming, in the dog's mind, part of the cue to listen to you. When you give a treat, align it between the dog's eyes and yours. You want eye contact with each treat. Soon you'll notice your dog seeking your eye contact even when you don't say the name. Always praise this, and sometimes give a treat to reward it.
3. You're not done. When you do this sequence, always do it at least 3 to 5 times in a row. That means each time you 1) say the name, 2) move, 3) say the praise word, 4) whip out a treat and 5) give it. This doesn't necessarily require much space, since you want it all to happen very fast and the movement is not over a great distance. You can move one direction the first time, back the other way the second time, etc. But always do at least 3 to 5 repetitions in a row before you release the dog's attention. This is what conditions the dog to SUSTAIN attention on you until you release it.
4. Practice everywhere, and don't be quick to discontinue the treats. Keep them up at least occasionally forever. Because you're not dangling the treat in front of the dog before giving it, you're conditioning the dog to respond even when you don't have food. You want to make the behavior quite strong and build the importance of other rewards (praise, petting, play, toys, etc.) in the dog's life before moving away from food.
5. By always praising before you give the treat, you are also building up your praise in the dog's mind. This will allow you later to praise at that correct moment, and be able to deliver the treat (or toy) a bit later (when you have to walk across the room to get one, for example) while the praise maintains the continuity in the dog's mind between the action and the reward. The dog will understand the treat is a reward for the behavior you praised. In this way you can reinforce behaviors you want to see more of--such as coming quickly to your call--when the dog does them at a time you weren't expecting to do a training session.

The attention exercise is not extremely time-consuming. Just take a few moments and do it in every location where you go together. It's surprising how quickly it becomes habit for the dog to look at you when you say his or her name--and equally habit for you to positively reinforce this response every time.