

## Teaching Targeting

### Hand targeting

There are many reasons to teach hand targeting. Targeting is a way of bringing your dog's focus and attention back to you and giving him something simple to do. You can also think of hand targeting as a sort of biscuit on a stick that is a hands-off way of "leading" your dog into a specific position. It can be very useful in agility. Hand targeting can help guide your dog through a turn so you don't lose him behind you and is very helpful for tightening up turns. Hand targeting is also very good for positioning your dog at the start of a sequence or course - the less physical pushing and pulling that you do with your dog, the happier your dog.

There are many handling aids that can be used when guiding your dog.. One such aid is hand targeting. When your dog learns to touch your open hand with his nose you can then use your hand to guide or position your dog. Teaching your dog to target your hand uses your dog's own natural curiosity. If you put your open hand in front of your dog's nose he will most likely sniff at it to see if there is anything in your hand for him. Your ultimate goal with this exercise is for your dog to come to your hand and bonk it with his nose when you put your open hand out and give your cue.



Start with 10-20 soft small treats. When they are gone, stop. Put your flat empty hand in front of your dog about 6-10 inches from his nose and hold it there. When your dog makes any move toward your hand, mark it with a click and treat. Be sure you are giving the click at the same time as the behavior that you want to mark. The click tells the dog what it was that earns the reward, but don't wait too long, try and get your rewards in within 2 seconds of sounding the click.

When your dog has offered the same behavior more than three times in a row, raise the criteria (i.e. require the next step of the behavior) and wait for him to move closer to your hand. Keep raising the criteria until your dog is touching your hand with his nose. Then move your hand to a new location (left, right, higher, lower, to the side, in front of you, etc) and start over. Notice, you have not yet named this behavior. In fact, you're not saying anything at all (other than your click). Be sure you're not

moving your hand toward your dog's nose - let your dog move toward your hand. Bring the food to the hand that the dog touched. Don't move the hand that is the target. Continue to move your hand around and ask for the touch, always bringing the food to the hand that was touched.

DON'T prompt, waggle or anything else, otherwise all you're teaching is a body cue. We want the pup to experiment a little to find out what earns the click. When the session is finished, make a note of things like, where you were and where the target palm was in relation to the pup, etc, and take a break. Next time begin with your palm where it was, but then move it just a little farther away. Eventually, look for the pup to turn its head away from the food to be clicked and rewarded and toward your target.

The next step in training, having got the dog to be desperate to offer the behavior - when you put your palm up the pup can't glue his nose to it fast enough - is to add a cue like "Touch." As your dog is touching your hand, say your cue followed by your click and treat. Gradually begin saying your cue earlier and earlier until the cue is preceding the behavior. You by now have seen your dog offering a nose touch many times - you should be able to predict the nose touch from the precursors to the action. To begin with you cue just before the dog actually touches, thus paring the cue with the action. As the behavior is better established, you gradually begin to move the cue back until just



the slightest of motions - a head movement, slight movement of the body, which predict the action are seen, at which point you add in the cue.

Once you have added a cue to the behavior, do not reward any non-cued targeting. This “stimulus control” is important as it gives you control of the behavior.

If you use toys for training and toys are in fact much the best reward for Agility training in many cases, then you should remember to condition your clicker to the toy as well. If you exclusively pair your clicker with food, you'll end with a dog that is expecting food for the click.

## **Object targeting**

Object targeting is useful in getting correct agility contact behavior, as well as teaching distance work.

1. The target. Use something small such as a plastic lid or piece of plexi-glass. Start with the target in one hand and behind your back. Gain your dog's attention, pull the target out and put it close to the dog's nose. We start with the target out of the dog's sight to cause him to be curious and investigate what is presented. Click (or tell him “Yes!”) and immediately reward your dog for looking at it. Then raise the criteria until your dog walks toward it, sniffs it or touches it with his nose. If your dog doesn't seem interested, you can put some food behind the target as a lure. If you use the lure, only do it three times. Don't let the dog steal the food. You only want the dog to touch it with his nose, not his open mouth.
2. Notice we are not giving the dog a command at this point. We are just rewarding the behavior that we are teaching. Be sure and switch which hand is holding the target from time to time so he doesn't start to cue to closely to your right (or left) hand.
3. Slowly lower the target until it is on the floor, reinforcing his “touches” along the way, and your dog is doing a nose touch. Don't reward if he is pawing it, only the nose touch. If he touches it in any other way than with his nose, say nothing, give not treat and try again.
4. Place it on the floor in front of your dog and click as soon as the dog approaches it. Be patient; try tossing it on the floor if he shows no interest. Raise the criteria for the reward to shape the behavior. Only reward if he does the nose touch.
5. Once you know the dog understands the behavior, add the cue “target” or “touch” before the dog goes to touch it. Don't add the word until the dog is performing it very well. Now only reward the dog for touching it when you command him to do so.
6. Teach him to run and touch the target by first dropping it and commanding, then tossing at further and further distances.
7. Move the target to different locations. The backyard, on the sidewalk or at a park. Increase distractions.

This is a shaping behavior. You must be patient. If you wait, your dog will most likely offer you the last behavior that earned him a reward. If your dog shuts down, you may have progressed too quickly, so you must go back to the step the dog feels comfortable performing.

### **Remember:**

- ◆ Don't be tempted to keep putting food on targets. Shape the behavior with a clicker or marker word. If the dog is not reliably touching the target, back up a step.
- ◆ Reward at the place the desired behavior occurs. Don't click for touching and then feed the dog away from the target.
- ◆ Behavioral shaping takes patience and good timing. We are teaching the dog to figure things out and rewarding him for doing that. The rewards must be immediate. The “click” or “yes” marks the exact behavior the dog is rewarded for performing. It acts as a bridge between the behavior we want to reward and the behavior that is being rewarded. Treat within two seconds of the click.
- ◆ Treat every time you click, even when your timing is off.
- ◆ Stop while your dog wants more.
- ◆ Don't progress to the next step until your dog is ready.
- ◆ Speed of training is important - if you want fast responses, you have to be fast too.