

Agility Directionals: Teaching Left and Right Commands

There are many ways to teach your dog left and right. Directional cues are always given from the dog's perspective. It is a verbal signal, not body movement.

Hip Tap Method

1. Have dog in between your legs facing away from you. You should be sitting or crouched down.
2. First treat straight ahead in front of dog's nose to get him to tolerate the position
3. Lure with the treat toward hip. Your dog should follow the treat and take it when his nose is bent around toward his hip. Your dog should be flexible on both sides. Do both sides several times. This is great for working on flexibility.
4. Tap dog on the left hip and when he turns his head, reward with treat.
5. Do both sides; mix it up.
6. Add directional cue before tap when he readily turns when tapped.
7. Give a directional cue and when he turns his head, toss a treat in that direction so there's movement.
8. Adding a Jump: Prime the chair cues as above. Then stand in front of a very low jump, holding dog as before. Cue, "jump left", and as dog goes over jump in correct direction, toss toy.

Starting with a hand touch

It can be advantageous to teach dogs the verbal cues Right and Left with as little hand and arm motion as possible. Minimizing motion helps keep you from inadvertently teaching the dog that a particular presentation of the hand or arm means to turn away from you. Excess motion can easily lead to confusion in the future when you mean to direct your dog forward and he thinks he reads your arm signal as turn away.

One way that works well is to first teach your dog a hand touch. The dog touches his nose to your palm, you mark it with a click or verbal marker, and reward by bringing a treat to the palm. Do the hand touches with either hand, in front of you, by your side, and so on. Name the behavior, Touch, for example. Also teach your dog to be comfortable standing by your side in heel position on both sides of your body. Once your dog is very comfortable with both of these behaviors, you can put them together to teach your dog Right and Left.

Choose one direction, left for example, and teach that in your sessions until the dog has some understanding of the cue for the behavior to turn left. Begin with your dog standing comfortably on your left side in heel position; do a couple of simple hand touches in front of and just to the left of his head. While the dog is waiting patiently for another hand touch opportunity, drop your hand from above down by his loin, lightly touch him, and say *Touch*. He will likely turn his head away from you, see your palm, and continue the turn to do his hand touch; mark it (c/t) when he does, and deliver his treat to your palm with your right hand.

Over the next few repetitions add the word Left before saying Touch, then drop the word Touch, saying Left only. Once he is turning a full 180° to your left palm with reliability and ease, add a pivot of your body so that you end up parallel to your dog with him on your right as you deliver his treat from your right hand. Drop the aid of the left hand presented for a hand touch by the loin as quickly as possible. Once your dog has some mastery of Left, repeat the process on your right side to teach Right. You can also try the same method using a target stick or wand your dog has been taught to touch lowered down by your dog's loin instead of your palm.

Tugging in Circles

1. Tug with your dog energetically and with lots of movement left and right.
2. Add a 360° turn to right and left while dog is tugging.
3. Add a verbal cue just before spinning the dog around in that direction.
4. Slowly fade out use of the toy. Use hand movement and reward with some tugging after every turn.
5. Fade the physical cue.
6. Vary your position and give the directional command: Face the dog away from you; place dog on both sides of you.

7. Vary the rate of reinforcement. Ask for a command a variable number of times before rewarding. For example, ask the dog for 2 lefts, a right, a left, 3 rights and reward. Then do 2 rights and reward.
8. Vary the environment. When you change environment it is often necessary to start the steps over until your dog achieves success.
9. Put into practice over one jump and then a couple of jumps to begin.

Three Bowls or Targets

Set up three food bowls. Hold dog and say right and release dog and throw treat in right dog bowl. Practice your aim first. Say left and throw in left bowl. Say *Go!* and throw in middle bowl. (*Go!* is the command for straight ahead in agility.)

3 targets out are a fun way of proofing left/right/go when taught - don't neglect the *Go!* - for agility it really is a 3-way discrimination.

Paw Waving

Left and or right paw waving is fun. Spinning to either side is nice too. You can start teaching this with a treat near the dog's nose and slowly bringing it toward one side of their body until they begin to bend their body to that side. After your dog is doing that easily and consistently, use the word, "Left" (or "right"). Practice both sides. Fade the lure (treat) quickly, using your verbal cue, a slight pause to see if your dog will respond, then use the hand signal if needed (the same hand signal you used before, but without holding the treat). Don't forget to enthusiastically praise and reward. If using your clicker, mark the behavior as soon as your dog starts to bend in the correct direction. Do not punish incorrect behavior. Stay calm and neutral.

Play Ball

If you have a dog that likes to play football - especially a dog that hates to let the ball get away – face the dog with the ball at your feet. Have the ball too close for the dog to be able to trap the ball without a little help and kick it either to the left or the right giving your cue **before** your foot moves.