

Intro to Agility Week 1

Respond to Name

A good response to your dog's name – a head turn – is one of the most vital aides available in agility. If you can get your dog's head to turn, his body will turn; and it can be one of the most useful attention-getting devices that you have. It's well worth devoting a little training time to on a regular basis.

Most handlers use their dog's name for a variety of purposes, including telling their dog when they are not happy with him. I suggest you decide on a *bad dog* name for your dog. You can use "Oi" or "You" when he has his head in a trash can.

If you are in the habit of chattering away endlessly to your dog, use a pet name. Don't teach your dog to tune his call name out!

We only want positive associations with his call name since we are working toward an instant response. We don't want him to stop and consider whether or not he is in trouble before he responds!

To begin, start in a quiet place at home. Gather 10 treats in your hand (or your favorite tug toy), get next to your dog, and when his attention is elsewhere, say his name in that special way. As his head turns, click and reward. Repeat until all the treats are gone or you've played 10 times. Do this twice a day. You should find that as your dog gets into the game, it gets a little harder to wait for his attention to be elsewhere. This is where you need to be a little more creative and add a few minor distractions. If your dog doesn't respond, you've gone too far too fast. Remember that we need to be able to reward the dog for this to work, so don't set him up to fail.

Week 2 is the same as week 1 but in a more distracting environment, such as the backyard. If done outside, be sure he's on a short leash.

Week 3, move into a more distracting environment such as the front yard on the street in front of your home. As his head turns after saying his name, click and reward. Again, do this twice a day for 10 times. Remember, all we are looking for is a head turn. This is not a recall exercise.

Week 4, continue with the week 3 training, but this week add in a few trips to somewhere different. Be creative. Go to the store and work in the parking lot. All you need to reward is a flick of the head. Don't try to add anything more and try always to set the dog up so that he has the expectation of success. No one wants to play a game that they think they will get wrong.

Week 5; It's time to assess. If your dog struggles with something, it does not imply any criticism of your dog. This training is important so don't rush it. Is your dog flicking his head reliably? If so, now we go back to the beginning and try off lead and add in just a little more distance. So with your dog off lead in your garden, try again, but this time add about 5 feet of distance. Say your dog's name in that special way and as his head flicks, click and then rush in to reward him.

Remember: you have a window of opportunity to reward your dog of perhaps 2 seconds, so don't hang around.

It really would help about now if you could swap to food in a tube or toy that can be thrown. Throw always in the direction that your dog's head has turned.

This is not recall training. All we are working toward is for the dog to turn his head.