

Intro to Agility: Week 2 Fun Stuff to Do at Home

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This is a fun exercise that will tune your dog into watching your body language and show him that it is worthwhile to watch what you are doing and to follow where you are going.

Start with a handful of yummy treats. If you have a safe area to work don't use a leash on your dog. If it's not safe to take him off lead, tie a long line around your waist. The key is **not** to use the leash to pull your dog in your direction. Now, begin walking around the area making frequent changes of direction. Whenever your dog catches up to you (in any position) give your conditioned reinforcer (CR)*, such as a click, and pop a treat in his mouth. Don't call your dog or clap your hands or whistle - watching and following your moves should be your dog's idea. If you are using a leash and it goes taut at any point (i.e. your dog is more interested in something "over there"), wait him out. If after a short period of time he still hasn't refocused on you, walk up and show him the wonderful treats you have (remember the treats need to be better than what's caught his attention). Don't give him the treat yet. Start walking away. As soon as your dog makes any move in your direction, give your click followed by the treat.

At first you will find that it will take a few seconds for your dog to readjust his path to follow your changes of direction. Reward any responses even if they're a bit slow. But, once your dog realizes that staying with you pays off in good things, he'll raise to the challenge of watching you closely and anticipating the direction changes. At this point, only reward quick responses to your changes of direction. Try to work your dog on both sides so that he doesn't get used to only following on your left side, for instance.

Remember this is a game - keep it light and fun. And, keep it short. Quit while your dog still wants more, don't wait until he's bored and looking for something more interesting.

*A Conditioned Reinforcer (CR) is the scientific term for an audible marker that tells your dog that what he was doing at the exact moment he heard the CR is what you want him to do. It also promises him that a reward is coming. Why train a CR for agility? Agility requires your dog to be working away from you, which makes it difficult to deliver a treat at the exact moment your dog is doing the rewardable behavior. For example, if you are working on jumps and your dog responds to your signal to jump the jump, there is no way you can deliver a treat at the exact moment that your dog begins his take off for the jump. But, using a CR you can mark that exact moment and your dog will know that a reward is forthcoming as soon as he lands.

Probably the best known CR is a clicker. A clicker is a perfect CR because the sound is always the same, it's not a sound your dog hears casually day-to-day and delivery can be very fast. However, you can train other sounds or words to be a CR. It is best to choose a one syllable word such as "Yes!"

In order for your click (or word) to be truly successful and useful, you must keep it pure. That is, click always equals treat, even if you didn't mean to give the click.