

Top Dog: A canine behavior series.

This is the second of a series of canine behavior articles. Why trust a veterinarian on behavior issues? There are two reasons. The first is that veterinarians see dogs at their very worst, when they are frightened, painful, and often protecting their owners. Behavior modification techniques that work under such stressful situations are sure to really shine at home. The second reason to get a veterinarian's point of view on behavior issues is that underlying health or genetic causes drive so many behaviors.

In the first article, about training your dog to be nice to strange people and dogs, I promised to specifically point out training methods that not only teach the dog a new trick, but also teach the dog that you are the "alpha" in your pack. Today we are going to get into one of those important items, the down-stay command.

The down-stay command is not only useful in itself, but used in two specific ways, it will also cause your dog to view you as top dog. Firstly, you should insist that your dog down-stay for food. Why? Consider a wolf pack, munching on a recently caught deer. If alpha wolf looks across the deer, and notices that one of his subordinates has a particularly tasty looking morsel, he can cause that wolf to give up that piece of food to him. It a basic rule in canine interaction, that alpha dog can take food from subordinates. Now consider what happens when you feed your dog. He perks up his ears as you walk towards his empty dish. When you pick it up and head for the food bin, he dances along side, eager for his dinner. You scoop out his food, and go put the dish down. He starts eating before the bowl hits the floor. This dog just took food from you. That's right. In dog language, when you obtained a meal, and then gave it up without taking a single bite, you told your dog that he is alpha. Now let's rerun the scenario, but add in the down-stay command. It's doggy dinner time, so you call you dog over to a spot about ten feet from his dish, and ask him to lie down and stay. Then you go get the dish, fill it, and return it to its place. Your dog remains in his original spot. You walk away from the dish. When you are farther from the dish than the dog is, you pause for a random amount of time, and then release him with a brightly spoken "OK". This time, he didn't take food from you, he got your leftovers. Although it takes a few days to teach him to down-stay for food, it pays off for a lifetime. Once he knows the routine, he will initiate it, running to his spot when he thinks you might feed him. In other words, he offers to acknowledge your dominance in return for food. It's a friendly daily reminder of who's alpha, that your dog cheerfully participates in.

The second thing you should do with the down stay command, is put your dog on an extended, but random, down-stay daily. If you watch TV, that's a good time to do it. Otherwise, your own dinner time works well. The extended down-stay should last an average of ½ hour. At first, your dog will stay for a few minutes, and then try to get up and walk away. You need to be vigilant. While he is in the process of rising, you say in a loud, low voice, "NO, I said STAY!" and push him back down. If he tends to bolt, put a leash on him, and tie it to your chair the first few times. Don't ask him for a half-hour at first, just keep him down longer than he would choose to stay. When he flops over onto his side, you know you are winning the mental battle. He is acknowledging that he may be here for a while. If he falls asleep, you won the whole war. At that point, he has accepted your dominance to such a degree that it doesn't even bother him. He doesn't think the extended down stay is negotiable, and figures he might as well nap.

Let's finish up by going through how to teach your dog down-stay. Start by getting a pocketful of very small, tasty treats (cat kibble is perfect). Place one of the treats in your palm, and close your hand around it. This trick is best learned on the kitchen floor, where his feet will slide when you help him down. Call your dog to you, and let him smell the treat. Then tell him, "Down". Crouch and hold your hand on the floor. He will get most of the way down while he tries to lick the food out of your closed fist. Repeat the command, and gently push him down. As soon as his chest hits the ground, praise him and open your hand. Leave your hand on his shoulders while he eats his treat, so he stays down. The release him with a brightly spoken, "OK", and stand up. When he has figured out "Down" well enough to do it without a push as long as you crouch and hold the treat on the floor, stop placing your hand on the floor as you give the command. Instead, just lean over enough to give him a little push on his shoulders, and then give the treat (and lots of praise) when he complies. Then eliminate the lean and push. From an upright position, ask him to lie down, and then reward him with praise and the treat when he is down. Remember to let him back up with the spoken "OK". That helps to

introduce the idea that he must hold the position until released. Practice the down command a few days before you introduce stay. Remember to let him up with, “OK” every time, preferably just before he would have gotten up on his own.

To teach “Stay”, have your dog lie down, and give him his treat, then hold your hand in front of his face, palm towards him. Tell him “Stay”, and then take one step back. Most dogs will get up to follow you, because you have treats. While he is lifting his body up, yell, “NO, I said STAY!” and stomp on the floor as you take the step back towards him. If you do this right, he will lay back down with alacrity. If not, push him back down. Either way, as soon as his chest hits the floor, praise him in your sweetest voice. The greater the difference in your voice and body language when he does right or does wrong, the faster he will learn. Now repeat the “Stay” command and take a step back. If he stays, for even second, step to him again and praise him. Most dogs will hop up to lick your face when the praise begins. If so, you switch back to your mean voice instantly, and repeat, “NO, I said STAY!” He must learn that praise does not release him from a timed command. He can only get up when you say, “OK”. Push him back down, hold him for a second, and then say “OK”. Hold a treat up, so that he has to get up to get it from you. Praise him for getting up and getting the treat. Now repeat the whole exercise. When you can take one step back, pause a second, and then return to him, while he stays, start extending the time, and then the distance, a second or a step at a time. When you get about ten steps from him, start alternating walking back to him before you give the OK to get up, and calling him to you with “OK! Come here!” Show him the treat to ensure that he comes. Praise him exuberantly when he does. Next time you put him on a down-stay, actually leave the room, but hide just outside the door. Most dogs will get up to follow you as soon as you are out of sight. Listen carefully, when you hear him get up, lunge back around the corner and yell at him. When he know down-stay well enough for you to go across the house, you can make the whole thing into a game by playing hide and seek. Put him on a down stay, and go hide. Then call him with “OK, come FIND ME!” in a happy voice. Don’t hide well at first, maybe just behind an open door. When he finds you, give him a treat and gush over him, “You FOUND ME! Good Dog.”

Treats and praise keeps a dog interested in learning. When he knows any given trick well enough that there is no stress involved in performing it, eliminate the treats. Your dog should always receive at least brief verbal praise for compliance. You can introduce the down-stay for dinner as soon as your dog can stay down about ten seconds, and has learned that sometimes you say “OK, come” and sometimes you return to him. Then say just “OK” to let him get up and have dinner. Don’t introduce the extended down-stay until he does it well enough that you can play “Find me.” He doesn’t get a treat for the extended down stay. You are telling him that he must obey just because you said so. That is how things work in a wolf pack, so he can understand and respect it. Treats are a great shortcut for teaching tricks, but in the long run, you dog will perform best if he does so to avoid your ire and gain your praise.

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