

Top Dog: A canine behavior series.

This is the third 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. In the second article, I talked about the uses of the down-stay command in this context. In this article, we will talk about uses of the sit-stay command.

In dogs, sitting is a deference posture. A dog that is sitting is in a poor position to attack, or dodge an attack. Sitting in dogs is like a handshake in people, it shows trust and a lack of intention of using available weapons. If you teach a dog ten commands, including "Sit", it is most likely your dog will use sitting as a way of saying, "Please" when he wants something from you, like food. Since dogs instinctively equate sitting with "Please", you gently establish your dominance by insisting that he sit and wait before he gets something he wants.

The first place to use sit-stay is when your dogs wants to go in or out. What does an untrained dog do when you let him in? He probably runs all the way from the back yard, makes a squirming motion to get past or between you legs, and he's in, muddy feet and all. In the dog world, what he did was rude. If your dog is at all large, it is also dangerous. Instead of just letting your dog run into the house, use your body to block the door so he has to stop. Then ask him to sit and stay. After a brief, but random amount of time, tell him "OK", and step aside. By physically controlling access to the house, you are establishing yourself as the boss, without conflict. Once your dog expects to have to sit to come inside, start asking him to sit to go out, too. Go to the door and put your hand on the doorknob. Ask your dog to sit and stay, and then open the door with a brightly spoken, "OK".

It is also a good idea to teach your dog sit-stay before getting in and out of a vehicle. Dogs usually love going on car rides with their owners. Dogs are also the ultimate optimists, choosing to believe that you are going to take them for a walk every time you put your shoes on, or that you are going to take them for a car ride every time you open the car door. Sometimes, however, you might need to get something out of the car, and you don't want your muddy dog to jump in. Similarly, when you do take him for a ride, there are times you don't want him to jump out, even if you open the door. If you enforce sit-stay every time you put the dog in the car, or take him out, you won't cure him of his optimism, but he will sit to say "Please" before he jumps in and out.

Another use for the sit command is to give your dog something to do right, when he is misbehaving. With dogs (and people?) it is always less effective to say, "Don't do that!" than it is to say, "Don't do that. Do this instead. GOOD!" When you come home from work and your dog wants to jump on you, all he really wants is to give you a proper face-to-face canine greeting. He thinks it would be unbearably rude of him to forgo a greeting to a returning alpha dog. If you can't be bothered to bend over, he will make the extra effort to come up to you. If you don't like being jumped on, ask your dog to sit-stay as he approaches you when you get home. Then lean over and say a happy hello. Very soon your dog will learn to sit to initiate a greeting. You can also ask him to sit rather than paw you, slobber on you, or crawl in you lap.

So how do you teach your dog sit-stay? First, put a well-fitting collar and a 6-foot leash on him. Have ready a number of extremely small, tasty, and odiferous treats (Cat kibble works well, or commercial dog treats cut into tiny pieces). Work indoors at first, to minimize distractions. To get your dog to sit, pull straight up very gently on his leash, while holding a treat closed in the other hand in such a position that he has to reach up and back to get it. He will naturally sit to make reaching your hand more comfortable. As his rear is moving down, say, "Sit", and then open your hand to give him the treat while you praise him exuberantly right as he sits. A few dogs will just walk backwards with their noses in the air to get the treat, and not sit. For those dogs, hold the treat in the same position, but use your other hand in a scooping motion behind his knees. When his knees move forward while his head is moving up and back, he will sit. Again, open your hand to give him the

treat and say “Sit”, just as finishes the sitting motion.

Getting your dog to stay in the sitting position is just like getting him to stay in the down position, discussed in article #2. Don’t start teaching sit-stay until he has sit down pat. Briefly, get him to sit, then put your open hand in front of his face, and tell him to stay. Hold onto the leash for this part, in case he either tries to lay down or leave. Pause briefly, and then praise him for staying. Many dogs will get up when praised. Since you didn’t tell him to get up, this is not OK. Instantly change your voice from happy to angry, and tell him, “NO, I said STAY!” Put him back in the sitting position, and ask him to stay again. When he does, release him with “OK”, and step back with him on a short leash to get him to stand back up. Then repeat the whole process. When he can conceptualize that stay means “Don’t move”, try taking a step back, and adding a second or two. Then go out in the back yard to work on sit-stay, and finally out into public. Remember, just as when you release him from a down-stay, to sometime walk back to him before you say “OK”, and sometime call him from a distance, “OK, come!”