

Self Control and Indirect Access Exercises

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Self Control and Indirect Access are the keys!



The keys to what? Everything! A dog that is easier to live with, a dog that does better at a chosen sport or sports, a dog that is well mannered and a dog that maintains his own control so you don't have to do it for him. These also teach the dog to THINK when they are in a highly aroused state (as some sports or situations call for or create.) The following exercises are taken and/or modified from various sources (I list where I learned of them when I recall.) They are not my own creation, but I have found they work very well to teach a dog to think and use his energy levels in a constructive and efficient way. They are presented in no particular order and can be started or worked on from the puppy stage to adult dog.

The interesting thing about the exercises below is that as your dog starts to understand the concepts of self control and indirect access (though these exercises), future exercises will be easier for them to learn. It puts some new tools in their learning tool box that can be used to figure out future training puzzles.

Indirect access simply means that the dog needs to find an alternate route to getting what they want. For example seeing food and diving on it is direct access. Seeing food and looking at the human to get a reward is indirect access. Pulling on leash is direct access to moving forward-keeping the leash loose to move forward is indirect access.

Leave-it (learned at Dog Scout camp, Clicker Expo and other sources)

Dogs that can choose to look away from (& move past) something they strongly desire have learned indirect access and self-control. This can even work for the highest value stuff like squirrels, bite sleeves and fast moving objects. It's so nice to know that a cue can prevent the dog from diving on something you don't want them to have at that moment (or maybe ever.) But wouldn't it be nice if the dog didn't need the cue from you? Having a dog that simply CHOOSES not to dive on something without first asking you for permission using eye contact?



To achieve that, you will teach the dog to respond to “environmental cues”. If the dog sees something on the floor that is clearly not a toy or their food bowl or something they know to be theirs, they look to you for permission before they investigate it. If they are working under a cue from you (heel for example) they don't choose to surf the environment for other things while performing that cue. If it is in a child's hand (or mouth), it's off limits. These can be taught to the dog. It's just a matter of making the concepts understandable to them (& making the choice to exercise self control worth it for them!)

There are several methods of teaching the dog to “leave it” that do not involve any physical punishment, yelling, leash jerking, etc. Dogs will sometimes understand one method faster than another. So try a few of these to see which your dog responds to best.

To get them to become automatic (not needing a cue from you) simply don't use a cue when you train them. Let the SITUATION be the cue. Be sure, as with any other behavior, to practice in many different locations with many different items until the dog learns to generalize.

Multi-step method part 1:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=13Hm059Qt-c>

Multi-step method part 2:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fx1PJxKc2-c>

Post method:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AjTHxPU-zwc>

Body block method: (no video)

I first saw this demonstrated by a person from Denmark (I think it was Denmark) that was a visiting instructor to Dog Scout camp but I don't recall her name :-(. Brenda Aloff also has this in her book "Get connected with your dog" and on the DVD that accompanies it.



A short leash, a nimble handler and easy to see rewards that the dog wants are needed. Start with items the dog likes but is not obsessed about. As the dog learns the game, you can increase the desirability of the object being dropped till you are able to use what the dog most loves.

Start with a short but loose leash with the dog in front of you, toss the reward item behind you. If the dog tries to get the item, use your body to block the dog from getting it. You aren't saying anything, you aren't yanking on the leash (hold your hands in front of your waist or hold your belt along with the leash so you aren't tempted to shorten the leash suddenly) and just prevent access to it with your body and distance from the item.

With most dogs, you'll also need to walk into them a bit to get them to back-up away from the object until they look at you. Eye contact is what you want to reward! When they do make eye contact with you, step back, smile, tell them how smart they are and you can click/deliver a reward for eye contact if you choose. Then step to the side to "open the line" between the dog and the item. If the dog dives for it, block him. The idea here is that anything they see dropped on the ground is NOT theirs unless you give them a cue that means "go get that." A specific verbal cue is recommended.

You'll repeat the above exercise until the dog is looking at you when you toss anything behind you (no matter how much the dog wants the item). You'll next increase the difficulty by going back to a lower value item and dropping the item more to your side than behind. Be ready to move quickly. When the dog can handle that, try dropping the item next to the dog. If you have done the above steps correctly and for enough repetitions, the dog should take a step away from the item and look at you. If not, go back and re-work previous steps.

Back Away Game: (Brenda Aloff –“Get connected with your dog” book)

This is very helpful for dogs that pull on leash or that are reactive to other dogs. It combines the body block method described above and loose leash walking/heel position training. It is described in detail and shown on her DVD, but this is a very abbreviated description for people who have been training dogs long enough to catch on quickly :-). There are many fine points of this exercise described in her book.



Start with the dog in heel position at your side with just enough extra leash that the leash is loose when the dog is by your side. It is helpful if you hold the leash at your center (directly in front of your belt buckle and against your body) with both hands. You will not be changing the length of the leash or pulling on the leash once it is initially adjusted for proper length.

As you step forward, if the leash goes tight because the dog is trying to get in front of you, step in front of him to block his path and step into him (causing him to back-up) until you get eye contact. This doesn't involve stepping on the dog, or anger on your part. It is done as matter of fact as possible. Just an “oops, now I'm looking for eye contact” attitude. As soon as you get eye contact, step away from the dog then move back to heel position. Repeat this as needed. Eventually, you will find the dog watching your shoulders and following your movement as though you are dancing. A slight drop of your left shoulder causes the dog to slow or back up while remaining in heel position without the leash going tight. You'll likely be able to get the dog to heel in reverse (as you step backwards) because he will learn to watch your body for cues about the direction you choose to move. Of course this means you'll need to be more aware of how your body IS a cue to the dog and use that cue consistently. You should also be using a “release” cue when you are done working on this and are no longer expecting the dog to stay by your side or maintain a loose leash.

As the dog masters the art of watching your body for directional cues, you'll be able to have them choose to keep a loose leash (or loosen a tight lead) by just stopping or taking a steps or two backward. As you do this, the dog should give you eye contact and either go to heel position or “front” position (sitting in front of you) whichever your body language or previous training indicates.

Once the dog understands how to watch and respond to your body language, you can introduce distractions. Can the dog maintain self-control/loose leash if their favorite toy or treat is on the floor? What if their favorite person or dog buddy is across the room? Can they back away from the distraction with you while maintaining eye contact with you? Gradually work up to higher level distractions.

Reorient at doors (Control Unleashed)

I love this game and find it VERY helpful! I have found that the key to having the training steps work is the value of the reward (how much the dog wants the reward item.) So don't skimp on the reward items when teaching this. You want to build a reward history that is strongly tied to high value rewards before you go to a more variable schedule and/or start varying the value of the reward.

This exercise can be used for any threshold (dog coming out of a crate, going into an exciting environment through a door, coming out of a vehicle, etc.) but start with the interior doors of your house or other “low excitement” doors first :-)



The behavior you are looking for is the dog goes through the door or exits the door and immediately turns to look at you. They maintain that eye contact until released or given a cue for something different. The idea is that the dog isn't bolting through or out and scanning the environment for trouble to get into. They can enter the training center and immediately turn to face you. They can walk calmly with you into the pet store. They don't bolt out a door as soon as it's opened.

Have the dog on leash and start with a low excitement environment, a doorway and a high value reward. If the dog is highly aroused by the opening of the door, start with an already open door. We'll work on the opening part in a minute. With the dog starting at your side, go through the doorway and stop. If they bolt out in front of you, simply wait patiently for the dog to turn around and give you eye contact which you will click and reward. If they stay by your side, click and reward for eye contact. Gradually build the duration of the eye contact before you click/reward. Add in the closing of the door before the click/reward too. The dog should not be breaking eye contact with you as you do this.

Keep in mind this is NOT put on verbal cue. It's going to be an “environmental cue”. During training, doorways should always equal waiting for a cue to go through (if a door needs to be opened), self-control and eye contact with the handler.

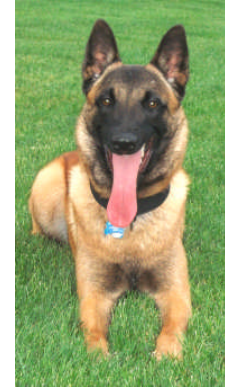
Once the dog can go through the open door with you calmly giving you eye contact or going through ahead of you and immediately turning to face you with eye contact, then you can progress to adding more distractions on the other side of the door. If the dog has a hard time controlling himself as the door is opened, work on the next part before adding distractions on the other side of the door.

A hand on a doorknob or crate latch should cause the dog to sit. It's going to be another “environmental cue”. To get there may take some patience as the dog is learning self-control. Only the sit position will cause you to open the door, so you have to be willing to wait for the dog to offer it. If the dog pops up, the door closes and your hand moves away. If you must, you can cue the sit a few times but don't do it more than 3 or 4 times. Otherwise YOU are doing the thinking for the dog. You might want to do several repetitions of sit and reward away from the door just before you try the door training to help the dog guess correctly. His reward will be an open door and cue to go through (with additional reward for turning around to give eye contact after he passes through). If he gets up before your release cue, he has to start over with a closed door. You'll want to give the dog a good foundation of this training with several repetitions before you try it when his bladder is full and he needs to go out! :-)

On/Off switch (from several sources)



Dogs do not naturally have very fast transitions from a hyper aroused reactive state to a calm thinking state of mind. But we expect them to have this in many different sports. We also often expect them to be able to think and respond to us in the presence of very high distractions (like bite sleeves, lure coursing lures, agility equipment, flyball equipment, livestock and bodies of water to swim in). Teaching the dog to remain in thinking mode or come out of the primitive “reactive” or “lizard brain” mode as quickly as possible will not affect their “drive” in a



negative way when done with reward based methods. It will, in fact, enhance their workability and focus and ability to do as asked with reduced risk of injury. They will be fast, responsive and still completely under control.

This will take a good deal of patience when they are first learning, so don't rush it or give up too fast! When I started this with my Malinois pictured above, he was only a few months old and so ball driven that he could not process or respond to known cues if I was holding a ball. While sitting and watching TV, I held a ball and said the sit cue once. He had already learned the sit cue and had a nice fast response to it if there was no ball in sight (or in the area). I waited about 10 minutes and repeated the cue. The whole 10 minutes, he was in frozen stare mode that would rival a border collie. His brain was focused on nothing but the ball which had not moved. If he had been hyper active, I would have tethered him on a harness to something solid. After another 10 minutes, I repeated the cue again. In super slow motion, his rear end started toward the floor. I said “yes!” and tossed the ball. I could have clicked instead of saying yes if I had a clicker with me. It took several repetitions for him to shorten the amount of response time in the presence of the ball (and I gradually waited for a more and more complete sit) but my persistence paid off. I didn't repeat or chant the cue. I simply understand that it takes a great deal of time for the thinking part of the brain to kick in when the dog is in “lizard brain” mode.

If your dog is that focused, sit down and relax, it might take awhile :-)) but if not, you might be able to start at the next level. It's typically the dogs that love play or tugging or toys that can get over the top excited so you can use that to your advantage. Use whatever gets your dog excited that you can control. In my case, it's tug toys. I will do a short bit of tug with my dog, then I will stop (either hold the leash so the dog can't continue to tug or cue a release) and cue the dog to lie down. Then wait. Just as with the ball, the first several times might take a long while. As soon as the dog starts to comply, restart the fun game! The re-start of the game is the reward for stopping and doing as you ask. It doesn't have to be a down cue. You can use any behavior cue the dog knows. When the dog responds correctly to the cue, you re-start the fun game as the reward. This teaches the dog to quickly switch from hyper active to responsive thinking. Eventually, the dog learns to remain in thinking mode while excited about whatever it is they are doing (agility, herding, flyball, bite work, etc.)

My dog will now do a full rally course for me just to get the ball I leave outside the ring and he's only 10 months old! He sees it as an indirect access exercise- “If I do this for mom, it gets me the ball I want!”

Tight Leash = Move away from pressure (based loosely on Brenda Aloff –“Get connected with your dog” book with my own variations added in.)

This is great for reactive dogs and to teach boisterous/rude dogs a proper dog-to-dog greeting. Anytime the leash gets tight, it’s a cue for the dog to back away from the collar pressure.



A dog’s natural reaction to pressure is to move into it. Once the dog learns that pushing against the pressure on his collar gets him the forward movement he wants, leash pulling is getting rewarded and will be repeated. So first we have to teach the dog that his natural opposition reflex isn’t what we want. Instead, we want the dog to move away from the pressure (stop pulling).

Start with the dog standing sideways in front of you. If the dog tends to swing away, you can position him between you and a wall. You only want him to be able to move forward and backwards, not side to side or spinning in a circle. For small dogs, you can start these exercises on a raised surface. The dog will only be taking a step or two at most (at first).

Calm yourself first (so hopefully the dog will follow suit) and put slight pressure on the collar toward the dog’s tail. Don’t add more than just slight pressure, but hold the same amount of pressure until the dog moves backwards and makes the collar go loose. It may help to brace your arm against your leg so that even slight backward movement is noticed and you don’t “take up the slack” inadvertently. As soon as the dog moves away from the collar pressure, click it, release the collar and tell him what a smart dog he is. If you have waited a full minute (it’s a LONG time!) and the dog is not backing off or is only putting more pressure on it, you might need to add pressure to his chest with your other hand. But try not to add too much pressure too fast. You are NOT trying to push the dog backwards. You are trying to add just enough pressure to cause the dog to try something other than pushing against it into the collar.



Repeat the above several times till the dog is taking a step backwards as soon as light pressure is applied to the collar. When this is happening every time, try the exercise in a new location till the dog is backing up on light pressure each time. Then go through the steps again in another location. Then you are ready to try with the dog next to you in heel position. Be sure that only the collar pressure is the cue and not your body movement. When the dog gets the leash attached, he may not be able to see your body as easily and you’ll be standing up straight.

When the dog is easily backing up several steps next to you with only light collar pressure, it’s time to add the leash. At first, the only difference is that the pressure comes from the leash snap and not your hand on the collar. Then you can add eye contact into the requirement. When the dog releases pressure, wait for eye contact before you move forward. You could also create a back away game (collar pressure is a signal to the dog to come to “front” position and give you eye contact- especially for reactive dogs).

Once you are ready to “take it on the road” and use this training during walks, it is recommended that the dog now wear both a collar and a harness. Use a leash with a snap at each end (one end hooked to the collar and one to the harness) or use two leashes. The reason is that you might not always be able to work on the release of pressure when the dog is pulling on leash (depending on the circumstances that cause the pulling.) So it is nice to be able to let them pull on the harness

instead of the collar at those times so you don't mess up your collar cue training. If extra control is needed, use a harness with a "V" front so there is a ring at the dog's chest. Snap the leash to this chest ring instead of the ring over the dog's back. As an alternative (or in addition to this training) you could put pulling in the harness on cue (leash clipped over the dog's back) and if the dog feels pressure on the collar it's a signal to stop pulling and give you eye contact. This way if you want to later do biking, sledding, carting, weight pull, etc. the dog will be willing to pull on the harness!

Because most dogs have been pulling for quite some time and it has worked for them, it may take awhile for them to transition the new collar cue to real life walks. So you should be going backwards (applying light pressure to get the dog to walk backwards) as much as you are going forward! Only gradually will you start taking more steps forward than you do back. If you must cover ground or get somewhere before the dog is ready for that much forward movement, be sure pressure applied is only on the harness and not the collar.

Work on the light collar cue with distractions from a distance before testing to see if the dog will respond to light pressure in the face of major distractions. If an unexpected distraction pops up, use the end of the leash attached to the harness to control the dog.

Stay

Asking a dog to remain in a certain position in the presence of high level distractions is something that needs to be built gradually and asks for tremendous self-control from the dog. It also should ALWAYS be rewarding to the dog and never cause punishment. If the dog is remaining in place because he knows a reward will be coming at the end he will be much less stressed by stuff going on around him than a dog that is staying because he knows punishment will occur if he breaks. The rewarded dog will see bizarre and unexpected distractions as just one more strange thing the handler asks him to handle before the reward is delivered! The reward trained dog knows they have the option to get up at any time, but they choose not to get up because that will mean they don't get the reward. If you build up the distractions gradually, the dog will choose to stay because they understand that's what brings them their "paycheck" and its easy money! Be sure to deliver the reward while the dog is still in the stay position and not after the release. The release should be a let down, not a party!

You should do everything you can to keep the dog safe whenever you leave them on a stay. They trust you when you leave them somewhere they might not feel 100% comfortable so don't let them down. If they are not feeling comfortable, the possibility of a reward (and a strong history of reward for past stays) can help overcome some of that anxiety. If the dog is punishment trained, having the threat of punishment looming as well as anxiety about the situation only makes the dog more anxious and more likely to bolt or move away.

Stays with rewards is a simple building block process. Build a strong foundation with lots of correct repetition and rewards and you can have a rock solid stay.

