



## Dog Scouts of America

### Tricks Training

## Tricks

According to the dictionary a trick is “a feat accomplished by a trained animal; a clever or skillful act intended to amuse. Teaching tricks greatly increases the bond between handler and dog, provides mental stimulation to relieve boredom, provides necessary physical exercise, relieves stress and helps to build a foundation for other activities. Additionally, tricks can be fun for both the handler and the dog.

Tricks can be simple or complex. The dog’s natural tendencies, abilities and preferences should be considered when deciding what tricks to teach. A dog bred to retrieve will find fetching items relatively easy to learn. That not to say that dogs don’t enjoy learning things outside of their natural inclinations. A dog without a genetic predisposition to retrieve can be taught the skill but it may take extra effort.

Using your imagination, simple or complex tricks can be turned into real showstoppers. A dog who likes holding things in his mouth can be used to deliver messages, treats or other objects to people. A dog who enjoys using his nose can find “lost” objects. A dog who likes to push a ball with his nose can push a wagon, stroller or cart. Trick routines are great for community events and pet therapy sessions since dogs can be VERY entertaining.

**TEACHING TRICKS:** Tricks are easily taught using reinforcers like food or toys. The dog needs something that encourages him to work at learning and because of its ease of use and its high value to the dogs, food is a fast and simply way to tell the dog, “job well done”. The payoff can be small and should be easy for the dog to gulp and go. Keep the treats small. Treats the size of a pea are fine for dogs of all sizes.

It’s okay to use part of the dog’s regular meal when training. Hungry dogs are eager to learn. But don’t forget to try many different kinds of food items like carrots, hot dogs, string cheese, cooked chicken, etc. Just be sure to watch the dog’s daily caloric intake.

When teaching something new, just a single treat needs to be delivered for each attempt at performing the behavior. Sometimes, the dog’s behavior is so outstanding that you deliver a jackpot: several treats one right after another that will cement the dog’s behavior in his mind. The dog needs to know he is on the right track.

A more variable reward schedule should be used once a behavior is learned. The reward schedule should be variable and should keep the dog guessing. Giving the dog occasional reinforcement actually encourages the dog to work harder since he doesn’t know when the next reinforcement is coming. When working toward a variable reward schedule start by asking the dog to perform the behavior 2 or 3 times before a reward is delivered. Remember that the dog must know the behavior before you can reduce continuous reinforcement. The dog can easily become confused if the reward schedule is reduced too quickly.

Dogs do what works for them and will continue to perform behaviors that get them what they want. If they behave in a certain way and good things happen, they are likely to try that behavior again. If nothing good happens (no reward), they are less likely to keep on doing that behavior. Don’t forget that learning is stressful. While learning new things dogs need to know when they are being successful. Along the way dog’s discard behaviors for which they don’t get rewarded.



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**CAPTURING BEHAVIORS:** There are a number of ways to get the wanted behavior from the dog and mark the behavior so that the dog understands what behavior should be repeated.

- ☐ **Waiting** for a behavior can take time but may be the best way to get the desired behavior. For example, “take a bow” can begin when the dog awakens from a nap and does a really great “downward dog” stretch. When a behavior is rewarded often it is often repeated.
- ☐ **Luring** a behavior involves a reinforcer in the handler’s hand. Luring a dog to spin or twirl is a very easy way to teach the dog this behavior since a dog will follow his nose. There is a downside though. If lured too often the dog becomes dependent on the lure and has a more difficult time learning the cue. A good rule of thumb is to use a lure 3 times only. After that the lure should be eliminated and the movement can be turned into a hand signal.
- ☐ **Using a target** is a good way to teach a dog to move away from you. A target can be just about anything, such as a hand, target stick, sticky note, plastic lid, mark, hat, etc. The dog is trained to touch the object by showing him the target and rewarding him for movement toward it. As the dog gets the idea the criteria is raised until the dog is able to touch or bump the target. Targets are handy for moving a dog into any number of positions and with a little imagination, they make great props.
- ☐ **Helping** the dog get into a position can be helpful to the dog in understanding what is being asked of him. For example, lightly blowing in a dog’s face might cause him to sneeze. Putting a piece of tape on the side of the dog’s muzzle might cause him to bring a paw up as if to cover his eyes. Some dogs will shake if their fur is lightly brushed with a hand moving along his spine. The use of helping should be limited since dogs remember behaviors better if they have somehow been involved in solving the puzzle.

**ADD THE CUE:** Once the behavior can be reliably predicted the cue can be added. Add the cue just before the behavior is likely to occur. The cue should be one that is easy for the dog to discriminate from any other that might be use. Once the cue is added the dog should be rewarded for performing the trick after hearing the cue. The dog may offer the new behavior at odd moments without being asked. These spontaneous offerings should not be rewarded.

**INCREASE THE DIFFICULTY:** Once the dog is reliably performing the desired behavior the difficulty should be increased. The handler should change his/her position, add distractions or change the location. Duration, distance and distribution of rewards should all be varied in order to proof the behavior. It is important that only one variable be changed at a time so that the dog doesn’t get confused. If the dog seems confused or is no longer performing the behavior reliably, the handler needs to take a step back and eliminate the variable before progressing any further.

The dog needs to be able to perform his trick anywhere he is asked to. To accomplish this the behavior needs to be trained in at least 6 different locations. If the dog doesn’t perform as well in one location other criteria can be reduced and rewards can be given more frequently until the dog is comfortable in



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the new location. Mastering the behavior in at least 6 different locations builds confidence and ensures the dog can perform the trick just about anywhere.

**SAFETY PRECAUTIONS:** Since the physical and mental wellbeing of the dog is top priority there are some general safety precautions that should always be taken into consideration.

- ☐ Check the **physical area**. Make sure the area is free of any debris or other items that could injure the dog. Props and costumes must be safe and non-toxic. The area needs to be large enough for the dog to perform and the handler must be aware of other dogs that may be in the area.
- ☐ Be careful when asking the dog to **jump**. Dogs under one year of age are still growing and shouldn't jump higher than elbow height. Dogs need runways for takeoff and should have at least 5 doggie strides leading up to the jump and another 4 for landing. Takeoff and landing zones should be clear of objects, people and dogs.
- ☐ Consider the dog's **general health**. Using treats as reinforcers is fine as long as the dog is not gaining weight. To prevent weight gain treats should never make up more than 10% of the dog's daily caloric intake. If the dog is overweight lower calorie treats such as carrots, low-fat cheese or flavored rice cakes are all good reinforcers. Other reinforcers like playing with a favorite toy or chasing a ball are good substitutes for food items providing the dog likes those things. Some dogs are happy to perform for a good belly rub or lots of praise.

If the dog's general activity level is being significantly increased through training the build up needs to be gradual. Dogs love to please us and will often keep on trying in spite of fatigue and/or pain. They often won't let us know that anything is wrong until they are extremely overtired or injured. In summer, all dogs must be watched closely for signs of heat exhaustion. Fresh water should be available at all times when training.