

117 Puppy Behavior and Training

Training “Sit,” “Down,” “Stand,” and “Stay”

How do I teach my puppy to sit on command?

Using a food treat, hold the food over the dog’s nose and slowly move it up and back over the dog’s head. As the puppy follows the food with its head it will sit down. Now couple the word “sit” with the action. The upward motion of the hand as you hold the food treat also serves as a visual command for the puppy. If the pup lifts its front legs you are holding the food treat too high. As soon as the puppy sits, say “good sit” and give the treat. Many repetitions may be necessary for the pup to learn the association. Next, practice getting the puppy to rise from a down position into a sit by bringing the food treat up and back. As soon as the puppy will follow the treat into the sit, begin to use the hand motion and the word sit but keep the treat hidden so that your puppy learns to respond to the hand signal or verbal command and not the sight of the treat. Gradually, as the puppy understands what you want it to do, only give the treats intermittently. The goal is to have the puppy learn to sit from any position (standing or lying down) and to then progress to a variety of locations around the home as well as outdoors.



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It is especially important to teach your puppy to sit by the front door. A dog that readily sits by the front door will do better when greeting guests. If the puppy sits reliably and consistently, practice sit training before feeding, giving toys or treats or during play (see (56) Learn to Earn – Predictable Rewards). In fact, any time the puppy is to be given a reward of any type, whether food, a toy, a walk or even affection, it would be a good time to practice a training command such as sit. For puppies that are easily distracted and hard to be focused, consider using a leash and head halter to prompt the puppy into position and then release and give the treat as soon as the sit is achieved (see (66) Training Products – Head Halter Training and (67) Training Products – Head Halter Training – Synopsis).

How do I teach my puppy to lie down on command?

Start with your puppy in a sit position. To get the puppy to lie down, take a treat and lower it between the puppy's front paws and say "down." Usually the puppy will follow the treat and go down. If the puppy does not lie all the way down, slowly push the treat between the paws and if the puppy lies down give it the treat and, of course, add "good dog." If the puppy stands up, start over.

For some puppies, teaching the "down" command can be very difficult. An alternative method is instead of pushing the food treat backwards is to slowly pull the treat forward. If that does not work, sit on the floor with your legs straight out in front of you and slightly bent at the knees. Take a hand with a treat in it and push it out under your knee from between your legs. As the puppy tries to get the food treat, slowly bring it back under your knee. As the puppy tries to follow, it will usually lie down.

Once the puppy understands the "down" command, make sure that you vary the starting position. You should try to get your puppy to "down" from both a stand and a sit.

How can I teach my puppy to "stay" on command?

Puppies can be taught to stay for short periods of time at a young age. Once they sit on command each and every time they are asked, without the need for food inducements, training can proceed to more difficult concepts such as "stay."

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First the pup is taught to stay without moving as you stand in front for 1 to 2 seconds. Remember you are actually teaching two things; first, "don't move" and second, "don't move when I move." Initially, give the puppy the "sit" command, say "stay" (using a hand as a stop sign can be a good visual cue), take one step away, and then return to the puppy and reward it for not moving. Be very careful that the puppy does not stand up or move as you present the reward because then you will have rewarded "getting up." Gradually increase the distance by a step at a time and the length of the stay by a few seconds at a time, until the puppy can stay for a minute or more with you standing at least 10 feet away. It is important to set up the puppy to succeed. Proceeding very slowly, and keeping a long lead attached to the puppy so that it cannot run away can help ensure success. Be patient. It can take a week or more of daily training to progress to a "sit" and "stay" for 1 to 2 minutes. Over a few months it should be possible to increase the "stay" to 15 minutes or more, and to be able to leave the room and return without the puppy rising from its "stay." For these longer stays it may be better to use a "down-stay" (lying down and staying in place) combination, and to train the dog in a favored resting or sleeping area. A leash and head halter can help to more quickly shape gradually longer sit-stays since a gentle pull is usually all it takes to keep the puppy in the sit position.

Once extended 'sit-stays' are accomplished, the command can be used to prevent many potential behavior problems. For example, if you practice "sit and stay" by the front door, this command can then be used to prevent running out the door and jumping on company. Have your puppy sit and stay while you place the food on the floor and then give him an OK or release command. This will help establish your control (see (61) Teaching Calm – Settle and Relaxation Training).

How can I teach my dog to stand on command?

Place your puppy in a “sit” position. Take the food treat palm facing up and move it forward and away from the pup as you say “stand.” Your puppy should again follow his nose and stand up. Don’t pull your hand so far away that the puppy follows you, but just until it stands up.

What else can I teach my dog?

Using the concepts discussed above, a dog can be trained to perform anything that it is physically capable of. A “down” or “sit” can be extended from several seconds to many minutes as long as we progress gradually or “shape” the dog's behavior. In shaping, we determine our ultimate goal, such as a 20-minute stay, and reward successive increments of the behavior until we reach that goal. For example, once the dog will sit for 3 seconds before the reward is given, we can repeat the command and when the puppy sits we wait for 4 seconds before the reward is given. Proceed very slowly, ensuring that the puppy is performing the behavior properly a few times in a row before proceeding to the next step.

To progress to a more relaxed “down” and “stay,” (see (61) Teaching Calm – Settle and Relaxation Training).