

Lesson 4: Teaching Your Dog to Stay



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It's not easy for a dog who loves being with you to stay where she is while you walk away. But teaching your dog to stay has many benefits. For example, a dog that stays on command can be kept out of harm's way when you need to run across the street. The stay command will also help your dog to learn patience and impulse control.

A visual command to stay can help you keep your dog safe when you're too far away for your voice to be heard, so we'll incorporate a hand signal into this lesson.

You'll use two verbal commands for this lesson: a word to tell your dog to stay, and a different word to let her know it's OK now to move (release her from the stay).

As with all training, pick specific verbal commands and use them consistently. The obvious word for the stay command is "Stay." (Don't be tempted to lengthen that sometimes into "Stay there.") The release command can be something like "Release" or "Free" or "Okay." Make sure it's not a word you might use for another meaning in other circumstances (such as "Release" when you want your dog to let go of a toy). It's probably best to use "Free," as you're not likely to use that for anything else. That's the word we'll use for this lesson.

Teaching your dog to stay involves working with three elements:

1. **Distance.** Distance refers to how far you move away from your dog.
2. **Time.** Time refers to how long you want your dog to stay.
3. **Distraction.** Distraction refers to everything going on around your dog that is tempting her to get up.

It's best to begin with easy challenges for your dog in all three elements: short distance, short time, fewest distractions. Eventually we'll work on each element separately, gradually increasing the degree of difficulty.

Let's get on with the lesson.

Lesson 4: Teaching Your Dog to Stay

Read this lesson first, and then practice it with your dog.

1. First, load up your pocket (or a bag or pouch) with treats.
2. Take your dog to an area where there won't be a lot of distractions.
3. If you're right-handed, put a treat in your left hand (vice versa if you're left-handed; you want the treat in the hand you won't be using for your hand signal).
4. Place yourself about two feet away from your dog.
5. Ask your dog to sit. As soon as she does, say "Stay" in a low, quiet voice and raise your hand, palm open and facing her, in the universal "Stop" hand signal. Look directly at your dog. Try not to move any other part of your body.
6. After a very brief pause of just 1 or 2 seconds, say "Good," lean forward and give your dog the treat from your other hand. **Important:** Make sure to quickly move the treat all the way to her mouth so she's not tempted to get up and move toward it.
7. While your dog is still eating her treat, release her by saying "Free" in a low, quiet voice, and lean back away from her.
8. **Important:** Let your dog get up or do whatever she wants, but do NOT praise or reward her for getting up. You want her to learn that the Stay action is the one that will reap the rewards.
9. Repeat Steps 4-8. Be sure you don't allow more than a couple of seconds to go by before rewarding after giving the Stay command.

10. Repeat this process five times.

If your dog doesn't do what you want

If your dog doesn't stay still for a couple of seconds, she's probably too distracted. Try moving to a different location, or waiting until she has less energy.

Make sure she knows you have a treat in your hand.

Keep your tone of voice low and quiet, letting it drop in pitch (versus going up, as if you're asking a question).

Make sure your hand motion is distinct and does not look like the arm motion you use during the Sit training.

This Week's Homework

Practice this lesson several times a day, with fewer repetitions. Vary the time of day and location. Make sure there are as few distractions as possible.

Remember to use the same commands ("Stay," "Free") every time, using a low, quiet tone of voice.

Give instant praise and reward after just a couple of seconds by bringing the treat all the way to her mouth so she doesn't move to get it.

Do not be tempted to see if she'll stay longer. Right now it's very important to lay a solid foundation.

Practice your "Stop sign" hand signal and make sure it's different from your "Sit" motion.

In Addition to Practicing This Lesson...

- **Reinforce Lesson 3, Teaching Your Dog to Come when Called.** Continue teaching your dog to come when called. Practice in various locations that are free from distraction, at different times of the day.

Remember the priority is to teach her that coming to you is a wonderful thing that will make her very happy. Don't use the come command when what you'll do when she comes is something she won't like.

Resist the temptation to give the come ("Come! Come! Come!") command more than once if your dog doesn't respond. Instead, go to your dog and show her the treat in your hand. Give the verbal command, turn and move away while clapping. Be sure to praise ("Good!") as soon as she looks at you, and then reinforce generously with treats when she reaches you.

- **Reinforce Lesson 2, Teaching Your Dog to Sit.** Continue teaching your dog to sit at various times throughout the week.

You can use a training area that is slightly more distracting than last week.

After a few successes when using both the verbal command and arm motion together, try them separately. First by saying the word alone, without moving your arm (or anything else). After a few successes with that, try using the arm motion alone, without giving the verbal command, during your next session. Alternate these during practice sessions throughout the week... separately, not during the same session.

Be sure to give lots of praise and several treats to reward the correct action.

Intermittent Reinforcement Begins

When you're confident your dog will respond correctly when asked (verbally and via arm motion) to sit, you can begin "intermittent reinforcement" for this particular command. Continue giving verbal praise, but back off on giving treats every single time your dog sits on command. Give treat rewards intermittently, at random. **This gradual withdrawal of treats is an important step, so don't skip it.** (You can delay it another week and continue with giving treats 100% of the time, though, if your dog doesn't yet sit whenever asked to do so.)

Start using petting (make sure it's the kind your dog likes—most dogs do NOT like pats on the head, for instance) and play as other forms of reward. Always include the verbal praise.

- **Reinforce Lesson 1, Teaching Your Dog Her Name:** By this time your dog should be responding to her name even when the level of distraction is high. If she does so consistently, you can stop practicing this lesson.
- **Give yourself a treat!** At the end of this week you'll have been patiently being an excellent teacher for your dog for a full month! You've had to retrain yourself to focus on communicating in ways your dog understands, which may be contrary to what you're used to. That's hard work! So reward yourself for a job well done. Go out to dinner, indulge in your favorite food treat, do whatever you consider a great reward. Seriously, please do this. You deserve it... and it will help reinforce your correct behavior! 😊
- **Have fun playing with your dog!** Don't focus all your time together on training. Spend lots of quality time just enjoying each other's company.

Coming up next week: Lesson 5, Teaching Your Dog to Lie Down.