

TRAINING A DOG TO SETTLE OR RELAX

An important training exercise is to teach a dog to settle down or relax on command. The goal is to train the dog to achieve a state of physical and mental relaxation on command. For calming and settling a dog as a training command (e.g., STEADY, LOOK, FOCUS), the goal is to teach the dog to focus on the owner. Another form of settle (SOFT, GO TO YOUR MAT) is intended to calm the dog that is overly anxious, aroused, excitable, or fearful in the home.

Once the dog has learned to settle, the command can be used to help achieve a calm response during the correction or management of a wide variety of behavior problems. It can be used to get the dog to focus when it might be overly excited or anxious in greeting family members, strangers, or other animals. It can also be used with dogs that become anxious as the owners prepare to depart or become overly excited when company arrives or when preparing for a walk.

Training a dog to settle and focus should begin in an environment where your dog is calm and there are minimal or no distractions. The sequence for training is to give a 'settle' command (or other suitable word), get the desired response (using one of the techniques described below), and then give clear and immediate reinforcement. Food, affection, or a favored toy can all serve as rewards if they are consistently given immediately following the behavior. Later, they can be given on an intermittent schedule and slowly phased out.

Calming exercises for any location

1. Puppy training – teaching 'steady'
 - While you are standing still, give the puppy three to four feet of the leash. If the leash remains loose, occasionally give the puppy a food or social reward and say 'steady.'
 - When the puppy starts to walk away, the 'steady' command is given as a warning. As the puppy gets to the end of the leash and starts to tug and pull against the leash, a final warning of 'steady' is given, immediately followed by a slight tug on the leash by the owner to get the puppy's attention and stop it. Then, slack is returned to the leash.
 - Upon compliance (loose leash) immediately give a food or social reward.
 - After several repetitions, the puppy learns that it is rewarded for keeping the leash loose.
 - Practice a couple of times a day in the home with few distractions. As the puppy gets better, gradually add distractions and start working outside.
 - This can also be used to stop tugging and pulling on the leash while walking.
2. Teaching 'look' or 'focus'
 - Show your dog a favored toy or treat and then hide it behind your back. Have your back against the wall or be in a corner so the dog can't get behind you. An alternative method is to hide the treat in your closed hand in front of your chest in a line between your dog's eyes and your eyes.
 - Say 'look' or 'focus' and as soon as your dog stops its attempt to get the treat and makes eye contact, use your reward word or clicker and give the treat. Repeat to improve consistency and immediacy.
 - Gradually increase the amount of time you require eye contact to last and then start adding distractions in the background like people playing or a fridge door opening, etc. Your dog **ONLY** gets rewarded after maintaining (i.e., not breaking) eye contact with you. Once the dog is consistent in giving the correct response even when there are distractions, go to other places (outside) and add mild distractions, such as another dog nearby or children playing. After each successful session gradually increase the distractions and work in busier environments.
 - The goal is for your dog to maintain eye contact for several minutes, regardless of the amount of distraction and background activity.

3. Teaching settle in a down position

- Another method is to use food lure training to train the dog to lie down in a relaxed position, on its belly with both hind legs on the same side.
- Gradually progress to longer down stays in a variety of environments and then gradually increase the background noise and distractions.

4. Head halter training

- The head halter can be used concurrently with lure–reward training, or by itself, to teach the pet to assume a relaxed position.
- The head halter is used immediately following the command to get the dog to focus and pull (or prompt) it into the settle position (steady, focus, down).
- As soon as the pet relaxes, the tension on the leash is relaxed and a favored reward is given.
- See our head halter training handout for further details.

Indoor exercises

Although any of the above exercises can also be used for indoor training, there are additional techniques that might help the dog to calm down quickly and effectively when indoors. These techniques can be used to help reduce anxiety associated with owner departures or fearful stimuli such as thunder, as well as calm dogs that are unruly and excitable or overly aroused when visitors come to the home.

1. Teaching a settle location

- Training the dog to settle indoors can sometimes be more easily accomplished by using a settle down area. The dog can be taught to ‘go to a mat’ or ‘go to a kennel’ where it learns to stay calmly for progressively longer periods of time for affection and food rewards.
- Food lure training, with or without the aid of a head halter, can be used to achieve the initial response. The dog is taught to stay calmly for progressively longer periods of time before the reward and affection are given.
- At first the owner may need to take the dog to the area to ensure success, but as the training progresses the dog should learn to go to the area on command to receive its rewards.
- If the dog is also taught to sleep in this area and favored toys are kept in the area, it may soon learn to go to this area to relax on its own.

2. Physical exercises – SOFT exercise

Techniques that use physical contact can help to increase the enjoyment and decrease any fear associated with handling and restraint. While the physical contact and attention may provide sufficient reinforcement for some dogs, food treats can also be used to mark and reward the desirable response.

IMPORTANT: Physical exercises are intended to be used only with friendly, non-aggressive dogs. If you think your dog might become aggressive, **do not begin** without first discussing this with your behavior consultant. If your dog growls or attempts to bite, becomes fearful, or struggles excessively during these exercises, immediately discontinue them and seek the advice of a behaviorist or trainer.

The SOFT exercise (based on techniques of Dr David Tuber, 1986)

- The SOFT exercise is designed to achieve a calm or settled response on command.
- The SOFT exercise uses gentle physical manipulation to get the dog in a position on its side with its back against the owner’s knees and its head resting on the floor.
- The most practical method to achieve this is to kneel on the floor with the dog standing sideways to you. Say ‘SOFT’ as you reach over the dog’s back and grip the front and back legs closest to you, near the paws. The limbs are then gently raised which pulls the dog back onto your lap, preventing it from falling.
- With the ramp provided by the knees, the dog is then gently eased to the floor and is maintained in this position using gentle pressure from both forearms and a soothing voice.

- The legs should continue to be held so that they cannot make contact with the floor until the dog is settled and relaxed.
- Some resistance can be expected and this will need to be overcome with a firm but gentle approach.
- Once the dog begins to relax and its resistance decreases, pressure should be gradually released but reapplied if the dog begins to struggle or rise. The goal is for the dog to learn that relaxation leads to pressure release.
- Once there is no further resistance, the pressure can be entirely removed and replaced by gentle stroking along the neck, shoulder, and back.
- Massage and stroking should continue for at least a minute after the dog has stopped resistance.
- Finally, the hands should be removed with the dog remaining in place before the exercise ends. During subsequent practice sessions, the length of massage should gradually be increased.
- Each time you begin the exercise, the 'SOFT' command should be given.
- By practicing this exercise multiple times a day, the dog should initially learn to assume the relaxed posture with a minimum of restraint and ultimately learn to assume the SOFT position on command.

Training aids

Training devices that interrupt undesirable behavior (e.g., unruly, excitable, aroused) without causing excessive fear or anxiety can be useful for providing a window of opportunity to get the pet's attention so that it can be successfully trained. Citronella spray collars (whether bark-activated or remote), a surprising noise (e.g., a squeaker, ultrasonic device, or duck call), or a leash and head halter can be very helpful for interrupting the undesirable response.