

Welcome to “Foundation Fundamentals,” my new article series. I will address training that you can do without any agility equipment. What a perfect training opportunity for those of us who are snowed in during January! There is quite a bit of foundation work that you can do just around the house to help improve your partnership with your dog on course.

By Mary Ellen Barry, photos by George Mariakis



Foundation Fundamentals

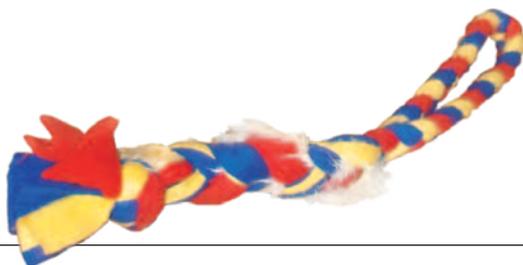


First, let's work on teaching your dog impulse control around distractions. This starts simply by teaching your dog to ignore the distraction until you give him a cue that he can have it. A dog that has been trained to ignore distractions can be trained for simple tasks without mauling you to get his reward and can eventually learn to run an agility course without leaving to sniff or steal food or toys.

There are several names for this type of training. Many people call it *Leave It*. Jean Donaldson calls it “RuleOuts.” Susan Garrett refers to it as “ItsYerChoice” and it is described in her book, *Shaping Success*. While the concepts I will present here are

very similar to what people do when teaching a *Leave It* cue, I never name the behavior or give my dog a verbal cue for it. Whenever I am training my dog, I want the *default* behavior to be to leave any distracting object alone. I don't want the dog to keep trying to get the object; I want the dog to ignore it, and then I don't have to keep saying *Leave It*. I want the dog to understand that objects around the training environment that I am not actively offering to the dog, or allowing him to take, should be ignored.

When I do release my dog to the object that he was ignoring, I use the cue *Get It*. This tells my dog that he can have the object. I do not use his usual release word *O.K.* because, eventually, when my dog is ready for more agility-specific training, I want the release word to mean that he is released for performing the task at hand, not to go to objects.



Getting Started

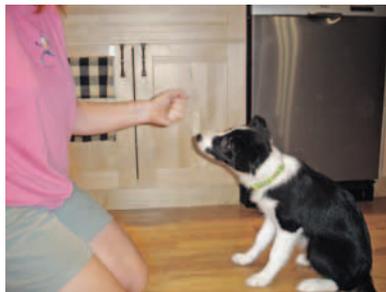
Note that I will use the word “ignore” in the following exercises. The goal in these exercises is that your dog does not make any motion toward or try to take the food or toy. He is allowed to look at the distraction; I do not expect him to completely ignore it at this stage. Also, I do not ask my dog to assume a stationary position for these exercises (for example, sit or down). But you may find that once your dog starts to demonstrate some understanding, he may sit or lie down. That is fine at this stage. You may even notice after working through these exercises that your dog has learned a stay.

Step 1

Kneel or sit on the floor with your dog in front of you. Put treats in your hand and close your fist. Present your closed fist to the dog. He will likely sniff, lick, mouth, or paw at your hand trying to get to the food. The instant he stops, say *Get It* to your dog, open your hand, and allow him to take the food. When your dog is reliably ignoring your closed fist with food in hand, move to Step 2.



The dog is licking and pawing at my hand. I will ignore this behavior until she stops.



The dog is ignoring my closed fist.



*I reward the dog by saying *Get It* and allowing her to have the food.*

Step 2

Kneel or sit on the floor with your dog in front of you. Put treats in your hand and present an open palm with the treat on it to your dog. When he moves toward your hand, close your hand and make a fist. When he backs away, reopen it. Each time your dog attempts to take food from your open hand, he will be negatively punished because the food will be unavailable to him when you close your hand. When he backs away from a closed fist, he will be positively reinforced because the fist will open and the opportunity to be rewarded is there. When your dog ignores food in an open hand, say *Get It* and allow him to take the food. At this stage, it is important to remember that when your dog backs away from a closed fist, you do not reward him by allowing him to take the food. His reward is that the fist will open again. At this stage, your dog only receives the primary reinforcer (food) by ignoring an open hand. When your dog is reliably ignoring your open hand with a treat available, move to Step 3.



The dog is ignoring a closed fist so I am beginning to open my hand.



The dog is ignoring an open hand with food.



*I reward the dog by saying *Get It* and allowing her to have the food.*



The dog is ignoring a piece of food on the ground.



*I reward the dog by pointing to the food on the ground while saying *Get It* and allowing her to have the food.*

Step 3

Kneel or sit on the floor with your dog in front of you. Put a treat on the ground in front of your dog. Keep your hand near the treat. Each time your dog attempts to take the treat, cover it with your hand. The instant your dog ignores the treat on the ground point to it, say *Get It*, and encourage him to take the treat. When your dog is reliably ignoring the treat on the ground, move to Step 4.

Caution! Dogs can progress through these stages fairly quickly. Many dogs are able to get from Step 1 to Step 3 in a 3-5 minute training session. Still, it is important not to rush your dog. If at any point during these exercises your dog is able to “steal” a treat, he wins. He will just learn to be quicker the next time to get the treat before you do. Keep your reflexes fast!

When you get to Step 3 (treats on the floor), you need to be able to get your hand or foot out quickly to cover the treat if your dog tries to steal it. It is imperative that you do not let your dog get to the treat before you do!

Step 4

Kneel or sit on the floor with your dog in front of you. You can start to mix up your rewards. Put the treat on the ground. When your dog ignores the treat, instead of saying *Get It*, give a verbal reward marker (such as *Good* or *Yes*) and give your dog a treat presented from your hand. He should still ignore the treat on the ground. If at any time he attempts to take the treat on the ground, cover it with your hand. Start mixing up permission for your dog to take the treat on the ground (using a *Get It* cue) with permission to take a reward from your hand (using a verbal reward marker). When your dog is reliable at this stage, move to Step 5.

Step 5

Kneel or sit on the floor with your dog in front of you. Start by putting a treat on the ground in front of your dog. When he ignores it, give him a reward from your hand. Put another treat on the ground. Your dog is now ignoring two treats. Reward your dog from your hand again. Then point to one of the treats on the ground and say *Get It*. Allow your dog to take the treat you pointed to. If he tries to take the other treat either before or after taking the first treat, cover it. Reward him for ignoring the other treat by rewarding from your hand or allowing him to take the one on the ground with a *Get It* cue; mix up these rewards. Build up to where you can have many treats on the ground around your dog. Next, work toward dropping the treats instead of just putting them on the ground. Also work toward being able to stand up next to your dog (you can use your foot to cover the treat if needed).



The dog is ignoring many pieces of food on the ground.



I reward the dog by pointing to one of the pieces of food on the ground, saying *Get It*, and allowing her to have that piece.

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Adding Toys

You should work through similar steps with your dog with toys. Do not, however, try the exercises below unless your dog finds toys highly rewarding. If you do, you will actually be rewarding your dog for ignoring toys—not a good idea if you are trying to build toy drive.

Step 1

Stand with your dog at your side. Don't ask the dog for a stationary position. Get a toy from a nearby table or training bag. Each time your dog jumps up or on you for the toy, pull it away. When your dog can ignore the toy with his four feet on the ground, say *Get It* and allow him to have the toy.

Step 2

Stand with your dog at your side. Don't ask the dog for a stationary position. Get a toy from a nearby table or training bag. Start to bring the toy toward your dog as if you are going to tug or offer it to him. If he jumps up or on you for the toy, pull it away. When your dog can ignore the toy when you present it to tug, say *Get It* and allow him to have the toy.



The dog is ignoring a toy dangling near her face.



The dog is rewarded by my saying Get It and allowing her to tug.

Step 4

Stand with your dog at your side. Don't ask the dog for a stationary position. Get a toy from a nearby table or training bag. Begin to lower the toy to the ground. If your dog moves toward the toy, pull it away. When your dog can ignore the toy that is on the ground, say *Get It* and allow him to have the reward.



The dog is ignoring a toy on the ground



The dog is rewarded by my saying Get It and allowing her to get the toy on the floor, followed by a tugging game with the toy.

Tip for Everyday Life See if you can apply the same training techniques with your dog's bowl at each meal time. Start to set your dog's bowl down and each time he goes for it, pick it up. Release your dog to his bowl when he can ignore it when you set it on the ground.

Next month, we will work on having your dog perform simple tasks in the face of distractions. Good luck and most of all, have fun! 🐾

Mary Ellen has been involved in agility for 13 years and has achieved the USDAA ADCH with her Border Collies, 13-year-old Zoe and 7-year-old Fizz. Mary Ellen and Fizz represented the U.S. at the 2006 IFCS World Championships in the Netherlands where they earned six placements including three gold medals and will again represent the U.S. in May 2008, in Belgium. Both Fizz and Zoe have earned many placements at national events and have been Grand Prix and Steeplechase finalists. She is currently training her young Border Collie, E-Z, and her new Fizz puppy, Maizy. Mary Ellen has been an instructor at Say Yes Dog Training, as well as Clean Run and Power Paws Camps. She lives in Norristown, Pennsylvania, with her husband George, and offers private lessons and agility seminars. Contact her via mebarry@kineticdog.com.
