

This month, we will continue teaching your dog impulse control around distractions. Last month, we introduced teaching your dog to ignore the distraction until you give him a cue that he can have it. This month, we will work on having your dog perform simple behaviors in the face of distractions.

By Mary Ellen Barry, photos by Clean Run except where noted

Foundation Fundamentals

Dealing with Distractions, Part 2



Note: You should have already worked through the exercises from last month before progressing to these. In addition, whenever you try a new behavior in the presence of a distraction, the dog should already understand how to do that behavior. We will start with your dog touching his nose to your hand. Again, if your dog does not already know how to do this, teach him this behavior before introducing the exercises to follow. Note that when I teach my dog to nose-touch my hand, I do not cue this behavior with a verbal cue. The presence of my flat hand is the cue for the dog to touch.

Introducing a Marker

While I am training behaviors in these games, I can introduce the use of a marker. The marker can be a click or a verbal cue (I usually use the word **Yes** or **Good**). If I want to reward the dog with a marker, I can do so in several ways: 1) I can mark and then say **Get It**, which will end the behavior; 2) I can mark, but not say **Get It**, in which case the dog should continue the behavior; or 3) I can mark, not say **Get It**, and deliver a reinforcer to the dog. So, for example, if the dog is nose-touching my hand and I mark a good nose touch by saying **Yes**, I expect the dog to continue with additional nose touches until I deliver a cookie or say **Get It** and release him to food or a toy.

Hand Touch with Distraction

Step 1

Put treats in your hand and close your fist. Present your closed fist to the dog. At the same time, present your other hand as an open hand for the dog to touch. He may sniff, lick, mouth, or paw at your food hand trying to get to the food. This should stop quickly if you have worked through the previous exercises. Continue to keep your open hand available and when the dog touches your hand, reward and allow him to take a piece of food. At this point, you should reward close to the hand the dog touched, not the hand the food was in because the placement of your reward will help build a stronger behavior.

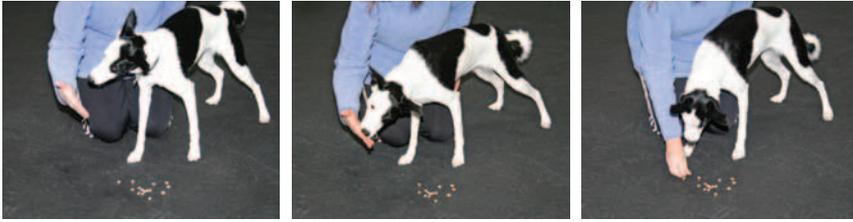


Step 2

Put treats in your hand and present an open palm with the treats in it to your dog. At the same time, present your other hand as an open hand for the dog to touch. Reward your dog for nose-touching the non-food hand. Reward close to the hand he touched.

Step 3

Put a treat on the ground in front of your dog. Present an open hand for the dog to touch. Reward the dog for nose-touching your hand. Mix up your rewards by sometimes rewarding with a cookie from the ground and other times rewarding with a cookie from your person. Build up to a few cookies and then eventually many cookies on the ground.



Step 4

Repeat Steps 2 and 3, with a toy in your hand and a toy on the ground.



Sit-stay with Distraction

Step 1

Put treats or a toy in your hand and let the dog know that you have it. Ask the dog to sit and reward him for doing so. If he paws at your hand or tries to steal the toy just ignore him and reward him when he sits. Work on this exercise until the dog sits immediately when asked and does not attempt to steal the reward.

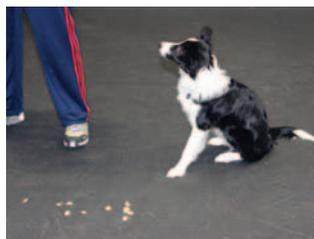
Step 2

After the dog sits, move toward him with the toy or food as if you are going to offer it to him. If he moves any part of his body (head, feet, back end) to try to get up to take the reward, remove it. Keep moving the item in toward him until he settles and does not try to take it. Say *Get It* and allow him to have the reward.



Step 3

Put the reward (treats or a toy) on the ground in front of your dog. Any time he moves any part of his body toward the reward, remove or cover the item. When your dog settles, say *Get It* and allow him to have the reward. Build up to several rewards on the ground and start to mix up the rewards: Sometimes say *Get It* and allow the dog to have the food or toy on the ground, and sometimes pick up a cookie or toy from the ground (or from your person) and deliver it to your dog while he is still in position.



Tugging with Distraction

Step 1

Put treats in your hand and close your fist. Present your dog with a tug toy from the other hand and ask your dog to tug. Reward your dog with the food for tugging. Build up the duration of your tug.

Step 2

Put treats in your hand and present an open palm with the treat in it to your dog. Present your dog with a tug toy from the other hand and ask your dog to tug. Reward your dog with the food for tugging. Build up the duration of your tugging.



Step 3

Put a treat on the ground in front of your dog. Present your dog with a tug toy from the other hand and ask your dog to tug. Reward your dog with the food for tugging. Build up the duration of your tugging. Build up to a few and then eventually many cookies on the ground.

Step 4

Add other toys to Steps 2 and 3. At first use a lower value toy than the one the dog is tugging with. Build up to the point where the dog will tug with a low-value toy while higher value toys are in your other hand and/or on the ground.

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Recall with Distraction

For these steps, you will need to have a helper.

Step 1

Have your dog in a stationary position either in a crate, or in a sit- or down-stay. Lead out slightly and have a reinforcer on your person. In addition, have a distraction off to the side that can be guarded by a helper. Release the dog and move away from him to have him chase you. Reward him when he gets to you. If he goes toward the distraction, have the helper remove or cover it. To start, reward the dog even if he heads toward the distraction first but then makes a good decision to come toward you. Build up to where the dog will come straight to you and pay no attention to the distractions.

Step 2

Increase the distance between yourself and the dog and do stationary recalls as well as those where you are running away from him.



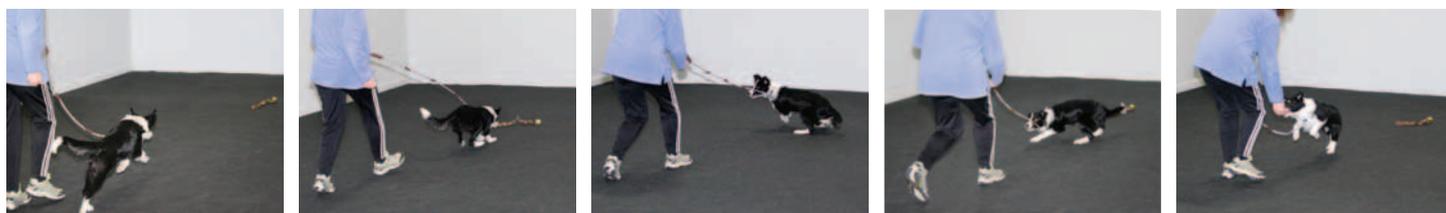
Step 3

Fade your helper so that the dog can ignore the distractions on his own. You may want to start with lower level rewards once you fade the helper.

Recalling Directly from a Distraction

Step 1

Have the dog on a leash and put a low level distraction about 10' from the dog. Have a higher level reinforcer on your person. Release the dog to the distraction and as soon as he moves toward it, call his name or your recall cue and back away, or turn and move away from the distraction. Reward the dog for coming to you.



Step 2

Increase the level of the distraction so that you can recall your dog away from any level distraction for any level reward.

Step 3

Fade the leash so the dog is coming because it is his own decision.

Step 4

Increase the distance of the distraction and the distance you allow your dog to move toward it. For example, you can build up to where the distraction is 50' away and you allow the dog to get to 40' before you call him back.

Use Your Imagination

Using the steps above and those in last month's article, you can teach your dog to do any behavior with the presence of almost any distraction. Once your dog learns that he has to perform the behavior to earn the reward, he will not be so focused on "stealing" the reward.

As mentioned previously, it is important through all these stages not to let the dog steal the reward and self-reinforce. If this happens too often, the dog will learn to just be faster than you. Keep your reflexes quick. If you progress to stages where the dog is able to get to the toy before you do, such as in the recall under distraction, then use a helper to remove or cover the item.

Good luck and most of all, have fun! 🐾