

Teaching your puppy eye contact and attention

In the dog world, direct eye contact is threatening. The proper, polite, and nonthreatening way to greet a dog is to avoid giving direct eye contact. But we humans can't help ourselves. So it's important to teach your dog that eye contact by a person is not threatening and actually brings good things.

Why is “attention” so important to teach your puppy?

If you can get and keep your puppy's attention, you can prevent or interrupt unwanted behaviors. This is a powerful thing. Puppies get distracted smelling things and checking them out, and teaching your puppy attention skills can help greatly when you're training your puppy on new commands.

Attention exercises

Try this indoors first. First, stand up straight in front of your puppy. Take a treat or even a toy and lead it up to your eyes, letting your puppy follow it and say, “[Your puppy's name], look at me!” When your puppy looks at you, immediately reward him with a treat.

(Note: It is not necessary to get your puppy into a sit position, but this drill is a good way to practice the sit.) If your dog jumps on you, simply move back and continue talking to your puppy to keep the exercise going. Repeat and reward when your puppy looks at you. Then try to keep your puppy's attention by happily talking to him (be silly—say whatever you need to keep his attention). As he continues to look at you, keep rewarding him with treats.

You need to teach your puppy that looking at you brings good things. If your puppy looks away (and he will!), simply call him back. When he turns back and looks at you, reward him immediately.

If your puppy is disinterested, first use higher-reward treats and get more verbal and animated. Remember, you are competing with a lot of distractions, so make it fun and interesting for your puppy to look at you instead. If your puppy has completely lost interest, end the exercise and start over later.

Keep your attention exercises frequent and short. Begin with 20 to 40 seconds, move up to 30 to 60 seconds, and then one to two minutes. In the beginning, try for three seconds of looking at you (without rewards). Then try for five seconds, then 10 seconds. Keep building on this, eventually working toward keeping your dog's attention for a minute or two. Remember, this takes time and practice.

Teaching attention from the side

Have your puppy sit by your side and follow the steps above. Once you've got his attention at a stationary position, you can take a few steps, asking for his attention. Note: This is the beginning of heel work and loose-leash walking.

Once your puppy's attention is good inside, begin working on it outside. Since you will be competing with many distractions, start from the beginning. Try for three seconds and build on that. Eventually you want to work up to minutes of attention outside, too.

Remember, this takes lots of practice. Never stop working on attention. This is great exercise to do every day.