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Your Smart Dog Spot On! September 2007

It's dinnertime, I'm busy whirling in the kitchen from stove to sink to pantry. There are five dogs in the house right now (we're dog sitting for Rocky, the first service dog we raised) and if I'm not careful, I'm going to wind up on the floor with a twisted ankle. There are dogs strewn about in various states: Nemo is sniffing the counter for a quick and easy meal, Lily's asleep alongside the stove, Lucky's lying in front of the fridge and I can't get the door open, Rocky is wandering from dog to dog, checking each of them out, and Tango's asleep so close to the pantry door that I can't even get in. If I don't get the milk from the fridge, the pasta from the pantry, and a muffin tray from the bottom drawer of the stove, dinner's not going to get to the table.

None of the dogs are getting themselves in trouble – they're all laying quietly (except for Nemo, he's perpetually searching for his next meal), but they're all in the way. You don't have to have five dogs in the house to have the problem of a dog who's in your way. Thankfully, there's an easy and quick solution for this situation. **Teach your dog to go to a specific place, lie down, and stay there.** It's easy and it's this month's newsletter feature.

The Power of "Go to your Mat"
Would you like your dog to wait quietly on his mat while your guests come through the door and get settled? Would you like to get your dogs out of the way when you're fixing dinner? Think it would be nice to have your dog sleep on his mat instead of begging all the way through dinner? "Go to your

Mat" works in all these situations. And the really nice part – it's portable! **Move your mat from room to room in your house, or even take it with you when you travel with your dog.**

Teaching "Go to your Mat"
Here's what you need to get started teaching this exercise: a lightweight fleece-type bed (similar to a kennel mat), clicker, and tasty dog treats. If you have more than one dog, work with each dog separately in a quiet room. Hold the mat in your hand and drop it on the floor. If your dog looks at the mat, click and give your dog a tasty treat. You're trying to teach your dog that the mat is "magic:" every time the dog goes close, treats are abundant. Click and treat any look at or movement toward the mat. **Timing is important, click the instant your dog moves toward the mat. Don't be stingy – reward your dog every time he looks at or moves toward the mat.** *Tip:* When you're finished working with the dog, pick the mat up each time. Bring the mat out only when you will be actively working with the dog and rewarding each instance that the dog interacts with the mat. This applies to every step of training this behavior, not just this first step.

Once your dog figures out that the mat is pretty special, you'll start withholding the click (and treat) until the dog actually puts a paw on the mat. Just one paw is all you need in the beginning. Click the instant the dog's paw touches the mat. You can toss the treat off the mat, giving the dog another chance to approach the mat after he eats his treat and comes back



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toward you. After your dog is readily putting a paw on the mat, don't click until your dog puts two paws on the mat. Then hold out for three, and finally all four paws.

Once your dog is standing on the mat with all four paws, hold your click until the dog sits down. I don't like to ask the dog for the sit, rather I prefer to wait until the dog figures this out himself. The instant the dog sits on the mat, click and reward generously. Once your dog is at this point in the training, it's much easier to toss the treat off the mat so the dog gets up (and off the mat) to get his reward. You can reward getting back on the mat more frequently this way.

We don't add the cue word until we've already got the behavior we want and it's just the way we like it.

Once your dog is really good at going directly to the mat and sitting, withhold the click until your dog lies down. Click and reward generously when your dog lies down. Again, with this step, I don't like to ask the dog for the down, but rather wait until the dog figures this part out for himself.

Adding the Cue

Now that your dog is running to the mat and lying down, you're ready to add the cue. Pick any word you'd like; some common ones are "go to your..." mat, bed, place, spot, etc. Wondering why we haven't been saying anything to the dog before now to get him to go to his spot? It's because before now, the behavior wasn't perfect – it wasn't complete.

We don't add the cue word until we've

already got the behavior we want and it's just the way we like it. Adding the word too soon, and what you're naming is an incomplete (and incorrect) behavior.

To add the cue: Say the word (or phrase) as your dog is moving toward the mat.

Click and toss the treat off the mat. Say the word again as your dog is just finishing the treat. Click and reward the dog when he reaches the mat. Tip: If your dog doesn't go to the mat, don't ask him again. Just turn your back on the dog for 30 seconds. After 30 seconds, turn back around and give your dog the cue word again. If he goes to the mat, click and reward generously. If not, it's time to re-group. Maybe there are too many distractions in the room – **if your dog is more interested in something else, remove those distractions or move your dog further away from the distractions to make it easier for your dog to get it right.** Maybe your dog wasn't ready for you to add the word – you want to be 90% certain that your dog will head toward the mat before you ever say the cue word. **If your dog gets this wrong more than twice, review the training and spend more time working with your dog until he's running to his mat in anticipation of the click and reward.**

Going to the mat should never be a punishment for the dog.

Adding Difficulty Time

Until now, the only requirement has been that the dog find the mat, go to it, and lie down. The dog didn't have to stay there for any length of



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time. To start adding duration to this cue, say your cue word that means go to the mat and withhold the click for two seconds after he lies down. (Just two seconds!) If your dog gets up before the two seconds, say “too bad” and pick the mat up. Wait about 30 seconds and then put the mat back down. Click and reward your dog for going to the mat and lying down. Gradually build up to one minute. *Tip:* You’ll get to one minute faster if you proceed in very small steps (one or two seconds at a time), instead of asking your dog to make large jumps (say from one second to five seconds to fifteen seconds).

Distractions

After your dog can lay on the mat for a minute, you can begin to work on distractions. You’re making this exercise harder when you add distractions, so it’s very important to eliminate the need for the dog to stay on the bed for any amount of time. You’re focusing only on distractions now, not time. So this time, when you cue your dog to go to his mat, wave your hands in the air a couple of times. If your dog stays put, click and reward immediately! If that was too much distraction for your dog, next time wave your hands a little less enthusiastically. Remember, you’re not working on time here – wave your hands and quickly click and reward your dog if he got it right. Change the distractions, making them harder as your dog is successful.

Distance

As you and your dog progress through these steps, another variable to teach your dog is distance. **You’d like your dog to be able to go to his mat even if it’s across the room.** To start working on this, don’t worry about distractions or the amount of time your dog should stay on his mat. **You’re just working on distance, so relax all the other requirements for the moment.** Stand next

to the mat, give your dog the cue, and when he gets on the mat, click and throw the treat away from the mat. As he’s going to get the treat, take one step backward, away from the mat. Cue your dog again and repeat clicking and throwing the treat if your dog gets it right. Make sure your dog gets this right several times at each distance before you take another step away from the mat.

The Finished Picture

Going to the mat should never be a punishment for the dog. It’s always something fun to do, a great place to be. As you increase the amount of time you want your dog to stay on the mat (say, while you’re eating dinner), make it easy for the dog to stay there by giving your dog a stuffed Kong™ during your dinner. The stuffed Kong™ will help keep him occupied while you’re able to eat your dinner.

As you’re training this, be sure to move around your house – don’t always train in one room, but give your dog lots of opportunities to learn that going to his mat – no matter what room it’s in – leads to good rewards.

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