

Your Smart Dog Three D's Are Required August 2008

DURATION, DURATION AND DISTANCE

“I know my dog knows what to do! He can do it at home just fine, but gets hard-headed when people come over or when I take him out.” This is the most common complaint I hear from dog owners; these owners truly believe their dog *knows what to do*, but is being stubborn or hard-headed. The truth, however, is the dog *doesn't know* what to do because the owner didn't do enough work with the dog. Hard-headedness has nothing to do with it. **This month's article will explain the very important three D's and how you can use them to teach your dog how to behave reliably in any circumstance.**

The most important thing for any dog owner to realize is that each of these D's needs to be taught – and should be taught separately. You cannot work on two or three at once. Teach each one independently of the other. Once the dog has mastered each of the separate skills, then (and only then) can you put them together. I'll explain what each of the D's are, how to incorporate them into your dogs behaviors, and finally how to combine the three D's.

Duration

What Is It? Duration is *how long* you want the dog to do something. You want him to sit for 30 seconds. You want him to lay on his mat for 15 minutes during dinner.

How Do I Teach It? Start with any behavior your dog knows well, sit is usually a good behavior to use.

Ask your dog to sit, then wait one second (no more!). Click and give your dog a goodie. Your dog is allowed to get up after you click – the click is the signal to the dog that he's done it right and can now (a) enjoy his goodie and (2) get up and move.

Repeat that sequence about eight more times, clicking after one second. If your dog was able to successfully sit for one second seven or eight times, you're ready to move onto the next step.

Now ask your dog to sit and wait for *two seconds* before clicking and reinforcing your dog. Repeat that sequence as above, and **move on only when you're dog is getting at least seven out of eight tries correct.** Continue adding one or two seconds at a time, only after seven or eight successes in a row. You can work up to any duration you'd like.

Once the dog has mastered each of the separate skills, then (and only then) can you put them together.

It's important to remember that when you're working on duration, you may need to quietly tell your dog he's on the right track. **The absence of the click is information to a clicker-savvy dog – he might try other behaviors in order to earn the click.** For example, if we've reached about five seconds of duration, I might say quietly “Good dog,” to my dog so he knows he's on the right track. My dogs are likely to move around and try to figure a way to make me click, but if I give them verbal feedback that they're on the right track, they are likely to wait a couple more seconds before moving.

Important: *Do not work on anything else except for duration. Don't move around, don't move away, just work on duration. You are staying next to your dog, not moving away from or around your dog.*

Distance

What is it? Distance refers to *how far away* you want your dog to be (or how far away you want to be from your dog) when performing a behavior.

How Do I Teach It? Start with any behavior your dog knows well, probably sit or down. **Ask your dog to sit (or down) then take ½ step away from your dog. Return immediately and click and reinforce.** *It's crucial that you return immediately.* This step is working on distance *only* – not duration.



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Remember, you can only work on one of these criteria at a time.

As in the previous example, remain at the ½ step point until the dog is getting seven or eight out of eight attempts correct. If you're not getting enough successes, ask for less behavior. For example, if your dog is getting up when you take ½ step away, you may want to reduce your expectations: merely lift your foot off the ground. Click and reinforce your dog *immediately* if he didn't move.

Distraction

What Is It? Distractions are real life. It's the doorbell ringing, it's the kids running through, it's a ball that bounces into your yard, it's the presence of another dog...

How Do I Teach It? **Just as with duration and distance, you'll teach distractions in tiny increments. Distractions come in many forms.** A distraction might be movement (a jogger), a scent (dinner on the table), or audible (dogs barking, doorbell ringing).

To start working with distractions, it's important that the distraction is under your control. Start indoors in a quiet room. Ask your dog to sit while you hold your arms straight up in the air. While it may not seem distracting to you, the sight of your arms in the air may be different enough to throw your dog for a loop. Of perhaps you can close your eyes and ask your dog to sit. Or face the wall while you ask your dog to sit. All these may seem like tiny, inconsequential changes, but your dog will tell you if they are tiny changes or not!

Work indoors until your dog is pretty solid with medium to high-level distractions. Then move outdoors with your dog safely on leash, and take those distractions way back down again. If your dog could sit while you zoomed around him at a job inside, start outside with something simple like your arms up in the air. There are so many distractions outside that we're either not aware of or we're not in control of. So it makes sense to "go back to kindergarten" when we move outside because just being outside makes your requests much more difficult from your dog's perspective.

When working on duration, distance, or distraction, it's important to know when you're asking too much of your dog. If your dog can't get your request correct two or three times in a row, you know you're asking too much. Break your requirement down: ask for less time, move further away from the distraction, make the distraction smaller (walk instead of run), make the distance shorter, etc. As the teacher, it's your responsibility to make it easy for the learner, your dog.

Putting It All Together

Once each of the D's is strong, you can begin to put them together. Begin by putting only two of the Ds together at a time. For instance, put together distance and duration (and ignore distractions for the moment). Also important is to reduce the difficulty of each of the Ds when you first put them together. So if my dog were able to sit for 30 seconds, and separately I could walk 10 feet away from my dog, when I began to put the two together, I would ask my dog to sit and walk 3 feet away and stay out there for only 5 seconds. Once you've put together the three Ds in every combination, you can then begin putting all three together, again making it easy for your dog to succeed.

It may seem like a lot of work but it isn't, really. **And it's the only way to get really reliable behavior from your dog no matter the circumstance.** If your dog needs help with the basic behaviors (sit, down, come when called, etc.) find a positive reinforcement trainer in your area, preferably one certified by the Certification Council for Professional Dog Trainers or the Karen Pryor Academy.

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