



Teaching Eye Contact as a Default Behavior

Don't you just love to watch dogs that are walking next to their pet parent, lovingly looking up at them every few steps? Or, those dogs that sit at street corners and then check in with their handler, waiting for permission to cross?



Teaching your dog to “check in” with you can be a brilliant way to teach calm responses and keep your dog's attention even when there are exciting things happening around him. It is also a wonderful way for your dog to learn that he can make things happen by just looking at you. Ideally, your dog will learn this so well, that he won't have to think about it when he wants something—just make eye contact with you and the world is his. It's like providing your dog with a way to ask your permission for the things he would like in life rather than making poor decisions, or forging forward on his own.

Goals of this exercise: To teach your dog to “check in” with you anytime he wants something, or is not sure how to respond to something such as a distraction in the environment.

Benefits of Teaching Automatic Eye Contact

Contact: This powerful tool should be on your priority list of things to teach your dog, and one to use as a precursor for all the things your dog would like in life. In other words, your dog will believe he can make you put his food down, make you open the door, make you play ball, or make you step forward during your walks together, and all he has to do is look at you.

© 2006 Rev. 07/15/08

This exercise not only teaches all of that, it also teaches your dog to become more comfortable with people looking directly at him, so it is a multifaceted behavior that can be used in many different situations.

What you will need:

Medium to high-value treats. Something to put your treats in that is easy to dip into and get more as needed, (a treat bag is best). A six-foot leash and a harness, or regular collar. A helper at some point.

Training time: 5-15 minutes, at least five times a week—two or three times a day is best. A well-trained behavior should be achieved in just a couple of days if you work on this as suggested.

Training location: Indoors in a quiet, comfortable place with minimal distractions. You will train in different locations with more distractions as your progress, which will eventually teach your dog that the answer for everything is to look at you.

Training Automatic Eye Contact

1. For this exercise, it is best if you practice this both on and off-leash, so your dog has had practice with and without his equipment. That way, when you begin to work outside of your home, he will already feel comfortable doing this with his leash on, giving you one less step to work through later.
2. Work when you are calm and relaxed, and be sure to take a few deep breaths as you begin to train. Also, remember to smile since you want your dog to see a happy face, not a grumpy one when he turns to make eye contact with you.



3. Take several of your rewards in one hand, and then show your dog that you have wonderful goodies in your hand by passing your open hand with the treats past his nose and then raising your hand high enough that he is unable to get to the reward. It's easiest if you have your arm raised straight out about chest level, (so you look like the letter "t") and be sure to



stand all the way up so you are not leaning over your dog, as you want your dog to see you in an upright position—how you would be most of the time with your dog.

4. Your dog will probably stare at the hand with the food for a few seconds, trying like crazy to figure out how to get it from you. It's important that you stand very still and don't help your dog in any way. The idea of this exercise is that dog will automatically look at you, not you prompting your dog to check in, so it's essential to stand still and smile.
5. The second your dog looks away from the food and toward your face, mark with your word or clicker and reward your dog by plucking a piece of the food from your bag or from the hand with the food, feed your dog, and then do it all over again. It doesn't matter, in this very early stage, if your dog doesn't look directly at you. It's good

enough if he looks in the general direction toward your face. The idea is to get your dog to stop staring at the food and to look toward you for some guidance. As soon as that happens, he will get his marker word or click, which will then get him the that reward over which he was fretting

6. Be patience, most dogs will look away in a short period, but watch carefully, so you can capture that exact moment with your clicker or marker word. Look for your dog's eyes to shift toward you—it does not need to be his head turning, but try not to miss any of those first glances or shifts in your dog's eyes or he may become confused as to what you what.
7. If after a couple of sessions, your dog doesn't bother to look at the food and looks right at you, mark or click and reward! That is exactly what you want!
8. Practice this in one location for about 5-10 rewards, then release your dog with, "All done," or another release cue and take a short break. Ultimately, you will also want to practice with your dog standing in front of you and at your side in the heel position so he learns that eye contact is the answer no matter what position your is in.
9. During the next round, you will want to switch hands with the food. Many dogs are right or left-pawed, so you might see the behavior speed up or slow down, but the idea is that your dog understands that checking in with you is a good thing, no matter which hand the food is in, or where you are standing. Practice at this level for about 5-10 rewards, and then take a short break.
10. Your dog should have a good understanding at this point that the marker word or click happens when he looks away from the food and toward you.

11. The next step will be to build this exercise towards your dog making more direct eye contact not just looking away from the food. To get the direct eye contact, you again, pass the food past your dog's nose, but this time you will have food in both hands. Your dog should then look back and forth trying to guess the correct answer. If your outstretched hands are chest level, he will have no choice but to look toward your face as he is shifting back and forth between your two hands. You will use your marker word or click as he looks at your face. Mark or click even a tiny eye shift toward your face. Don't hold out for the entire behavior if he doesn't get it at first, you will get there soon enough, and by marking little pieces of it, your dog will have a complete understanding that looking at you will make you say your marker word or click and then he gets the reward. Of course, if your dog makes full-on eye contact right away, mark and reward that. It shouldn't take too many trials to get your dog's full eye contact, but always be sure to go back to easier steps if he is having any difficulty.

Getting your Dog to Stare at You for Longer Periods

1. You should be receiving lots of brief eye contact from your dog before you try to add duration. If your dog can look away from the food 8 out of 10 times (or never look at the food in the first place) to give you direct eye contact, you are ready to add this step. You will begin with your food in one hand again, and then after your dog makes eye contact, delay your marker word or click for 1 second, as long as he keeps looking at you. Do this one-second eye contact for 5-10 repetitions. From there, you can add more time as you train. Be sure to mix it up and sometimes mark or click fast, while other times hold out for slightly longer periods. If at any point

your dog seems confused, make the time shorter for a couple of rounds, and then gradually add a little more time.

2. Now that your dog can look at you for longer durations, it is time to be less exaggerated with the food in your hands. This is to help your dog learn to make eye contact with you all the time, not just when you are standing with your arms out to your sides.
3. Start with less exaggeration by holding the hand with the food in front of your stomach area, rather than out from your side. After you show your dog the treats in your hand, close your fist around the treats and bring your hand up to your stomach area. Mark or click and reward when your dog looks away from your hand and looks up to make eye contact. He will have to shift his eyes up, past your hand, which is sometimes hard to see, so work in a well-lit room, and pay close attention. Do that for several trials until your dog is reliably looking at you and not your hands.
4. Putting your hands behind your back or in a pocket could be the next round of practice. The standard is the same; when your dog looks at you, use your marker word or click and reward the eye contact for several trials.
5. Finally, work on not having any food in your hands (have your rewards in a treat pouch, on a counter or on a table) and wait for the eye contact then follow through with your marker word or click and reward.

Make it Harder

1. The final goal for automatic eye contact is to have your dog check in with you, no matter what is going on around him. By adding distractions to your daily training,

you will expedite reaching that goal. It's usually best to teach this part on leash so your dog doesn't have the opportunity to walk away or try to get to the distraction in case it is too hard for him to stay focused, as well as to support attention toward you whenever he is on a leash.

2. It is often easier to have a helper for this part so you can focus on your dog while they introduce the distractions. Your helper can be one of the distractions if your dog loves to greet people. Start with easy distractions that your dog won't be overly enthusiastic about, such as an old toy that has lost its appeal for your dog, or have your helper stand at a far enough distance that your dog remains calm if your dog is a people-loving dog. By using distractions that are easy in the beginning, and that grow more difficult, it will allow you to keep your dog's attention each step of the way. This will teach your dog that the rest of the world is a big question mark, but you are the certainty in his life and will mark or click and reward as he turns his attention back to you.
3. If at any point you are unable to keep your dog's focus on you, use an easier and less exciting distraction. In other words, if your dog is a nut for a tennis ball, don't start with that or you may never get eye contact. Even when you have worked up to the tennis ball, start at a great enough distance so your dog can look away from the distraction and back to you.
4. When you are ready to proceed, your helper can hold a toy out of reach from your dog, but in his visual sight. If you don't have a helper, just toss the toy far enough away that it is out of your dog's reach, which is where the leash comes in to prevent your dog from getting the distraction. It's important that you keep your dog's attention from the start so he doesn't pull you toward the distraction. If he should start to pull toward the object, stand with your arms tucked, and avoid stepping forward and potentially allowing him to get to the distraction. By holding tight, you will show your dog that his efforts are not going to work. (If your dog is really strong, you can tie his leash to a heavy piece of furniture, or loop in over the inside of a doorknob and close the door so the leash is secured on the other side of the door.) Now, simply wait in silence and use your marker word or click the second he looks back at you to figure out why you are not moving, and then give your dog the treat, but do so close to you so he learns to come back to you each time. Again, if the distraction seems too difficult for your dog, have the distraction farther away when you begin, or use an easier distraction.
5. Now, have your helper move the object around a bit (or you pick up the toy and move it around then toss it out of reach) and wait for your dog to check in with you before you mark or click and give the reward. Remember to feed your dog right next to you so he learns that his rewards always happen close to you. This will teach him to stay closer in general since he won't want to waste all that energy moving away from you, just to have to move back again.
6. After you have successfully kept your dog looking at you with a low-level distraction, you can start to make it harder. The real trick, however, is to have the value of your reward, match or exceed the distraction. You can achieve this by working at a greater distance so your dog calculates that getting to the distraction is impossible but you are great to hang around with, or better yet, using rewards that will keep your dog's attention from the get-go.

7. Move with your dog and get eye contact. Walk around and each time your dog checks in, click and treat. Try feeding your treat on the side you want your dog to walk to help build eye contact when you walk together.

Other Distractions you can add

1. You can train your dog to be less excited when people approach and lean over your dog. You will have your helper bend slightly at the waist (ask your helper not to make eye contact at first) and then wait until your dog looks back at you—mark or click and reward. Do this several times before having your helper lean more, and then finally bend and make eye contact. Be sure to do this on leash in case your dog becomes overly excited and tries to jump. You would instruct your helper to keep enough distance that your dog would not be able to jump, and then mark or click and treat when your dog looks back at you. Do several rounds at this level and then have your helper step a little closer. Be sure to instruct your helper to step away if your dog seems too excited and liable to jump.
2. Teach your dog to be more comfortable with people reaching out to him by having someone reach out toward your dog, but stop short of petting him—mark or click and reward when he looks back to you. After several successful sessions at this level, have the person actually touch your dog—mark or click and reward when he looks back at you. If your dog is a jumper, do the first exercise in this section before advancing to petting.
3. You can also use things such as food on the floor. However, you will need to prevent your dog from getting the food, so you may want to have a helper that will cover the food with their hand or a bowl if your dog gets close so your dog never

gets to the distraction. It's better to start with less valuable food on the floor than your rewards. You can drop a piece of food on the floor and let your dog see the food, but cover it if he begins to move toward it. You will not tell your dog anything—you want to convince him that he should ignore that piece of food under your foot because if he just looks at you, you will give him what he wants anyway. Your dog may fuss and paw at your foot, and that's okay, just don't let him get the food, and he will eventually give up and look at you. Click or mark and reward the second he gives up on fussing with the food under your foot, or that your helper has covered. Work toward being able to uncover the food completely and your dog looking up to you. If you get that success, do several click or marker word and rewards in a row to show your dog that you are way better than that measly little piece of food on the floor.

4. Toys with squeakers, or toys that have action such as balls can also be added to the list of distractions as well. Again, you will want to be sure that your dog is unable to get to them and self-reward, so using a leash or a helper to prevent your dog from getting to the distraction. You wouldn't start with bouncing the ball if your dog loves balls, as that would be too difficult. Instead, you would just set the ball on the ground and prevent your dog from getting to it, then when he looks at you, mark or click and reward. The next step would be to roll the ball slowly, and then waiting for the eye contact before you mark or click and reward, and finally after a number of good successes at that level, you might try bouncing the ball. (You can allow your dog to play ball after a few good successes, but release your dog first with a release cue, such as, "All done," or another word before you play ball. Follow the same instructions for high-value toys.

5. Use real life desires with the automatic eye contact. If your dog wants to go outside, wait for eye contact before you open the door. Get eye contact when you are going to feed your dog each day. Looking at you will make you put the bowl down. If your dog wants to sniff around, or urinate while out on walks, get eye contact and then give permission to do those things. In other words, teach your dog that checking in with you, makes all the things he loves happen!

Problem Solving

My dog keeps lunging toward the food or toy when I try using these as distractions: When introducing high-end distractions, it is important that you don't work so close to the distraction that your dog is hitting the end of the leash to try and get to it. That would be a major punishment for your dog if every time you work with him, he is being "nailed" by his leash and collar. Instead, introduce things slowly and at a distance. The same goes for working with people as your distraction. If people overly excite your dog, just ask your helpers to step further away, and the leash will prevent him from being reinforced by getting to the person.