

Off, you win !

here's a game that teaches

more than just a new behaviour



by Carolyn Clark

Teaching the Off command is a terrific way to show people how a dog learns by the immediate consequence of his behaviour. It also demonstrates that a dog learns in very specific context and does not immediately generalize. This exercise is also a lovely way to teach owners when to introduce a cue for the behaviour.

Using the exercise, owners learn to observe and identify the actual behaviours their pup is offering. When they see lots of different things, they can see how intelligent their pup is rather than how "difficult" or "bad" he is.

This exercise is also a good way to get the puppy to try out (emit) lots of behaviours in order to find the one that wins. Remember, there is only one right answer: Pup moves nose away.

Tell the owners to list each new thing pup tries, and note how long it takes for the pup to move away each time. Start with this simple demonstration:

Stand on the pup's leash. Hold treat in one hand and say, "take it" and give him one for free. Now, hold the treat in your closed hand (I do this palm up) at the pup's nose level. Keep your hand still and allow him to work on your hand. Be patient. The instant his nose moves away, for any reason, open your hand and say "take it." If you're using a conditioned reinforcer, mark the moment before releasing the treat. Repeat, until pup is moving his nose away when you present your closed hand.

(Note: tell owners pup may "regress" to try old stuff just to be sure." This is normal. Just let him figure it out that there really is only one right answer.)

Now change the rules. Pup must move his nose away and not touch your hand for a count of 2 (then 4, 3, 5 ..) before you mark it and open your hand.

Now say "off" as you present your closed hand.

Ask the class if they think the pup is catching on. They will be amazed and say yes. You can now bet

them that if you rotate your position a quarter turn, the pup will go right back to the first things he tried out. (If you were facing North, turn to face East.) Repeat from the beginning. The pup will make "mistakes" and he will catch on again. Now face South, repeat, then West and repeat. Ask owners what they noticed. They will probably say that the puppy got faster or better at figuring out the game each time.

Now you can relate this demonstration to their real lives. What the puppy learns in the kitchen he doesn't necessarily know in the family room. What he knows with one person he doesn't necessarily know with another person. Also point out that the more experience he has figuring out the rules in different places and with different people, the better he'll be at generalizing.

In the second week, you can change the exercise. Review with food in your closed fist. Now change the rules. "Just because you can see it does not mean you can have it." Proceed as before, but this time hold the food on your open hand. Any movement by the pup toward the food causes you to close your hand. (Be sure you are keeping your hand in place.) When the pup waits or pulls his head back, mark that and say, "take it." Repeat, gradually varying the time pup is required to wait.

Now change the rules again. Lower your open hand. Any move toward your hand causes you to close your hand. "Just because it is close to the floor doesn't mean you can have it." Follow the above procedures.

Next, put the food on the floor. Be quick to cover the food with your hand or foot when pup tries to get it. He must not be successful at grabbing! The new rule; "Just because it's on the floor doesn't mean you can have it."

Next, drop a piece of food on the floor. New rule; "Just because it falls on the floor, it does not mean you can have it."

A tip: Be sure to pick up the food BEFORE you mark. We want the pup to look to you for all good things rather than waiting to dive on the food. This is an excellent safety rule around children. If a child drops something it is not good to have pup and child

reach for it at the same time. Also, if something such as a chicken bone falls to the floor, it will be important to be able to safely reach for it, pick it up, check it and, perhaps pull off a tiny safe scrap for the pup. When he is good at this game, you can occasionally surprise him by saying, “get it.”

Have your class use this “game” with their puppies’ food dishes at home. When all is going well, try some of these variations.

Drop a piece of food. “Off.” When the dog looks at you, click, pick up the food and give it to him. Looking at you wins.

Now, the dog looks at you, pick up the food and click when the dog is looking at you after you pick it up. Looking at you, in spite of movement, wins.

Drop three pieces, one after the other. “Off.” When the dog looks at you, give him a piece of food from your pocket or table or ... and then give him the pieces on the floor one at a time. Click (or your own conditioned reinforcer) and give a jackpot. (Giving food without the click is sort of a keep going reinforcement.)

Drop food or a toy on the floor. “Off.” When the dog looks at you, give a great reward. Wait till he looks at you again. Mark that and pick up the food from the floor, but don’t give that; give something much better and throw a toy or play tug if either of those is something the dog loves to do.

In a class setting, issue the “Kentucky Fried Chicken Challenge” in week two, to be held the last class.

Tell the class that if they do the work and the sequences, the last class you will bring in some Kentucky Fried Chicken. You will offer the handler a piece which will “accidentally” drop on the floor. Say “Off” (keeping in mind that you will also be quick to prevent the dog from getting it – if necessary, cover with your foot!) When dog looks at you, pick up the chicken, click, and break a little piece off and give it to the dog.

Use “Off, You Win” for things other than food.

Approach a friendly dog. Say “Off” and when your dog stops or moves back a little, click and allow the dogs to “Say hi” (ie: greet/or go play with the other dog).

Use with toys, retrieve articles, interesting things to sniff. Make up your own “Off, You Win” variations.

In a class, invite the students to come up with a “challenge”. The challenger must be able to successfully demonstrate with their own dog. Then the class is invited to “take the challenge” the following week.

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