

# Obedience Training for Dogs

## Problem

New canine owners often assume that their new dogs will automatically behave without formal training. They fail to realize that obedience training is what develops a dog into a compatible companion animal. Without obedience training, a dog may become a nuisance and a source of stress rather than a source of pride and comfort.

## Situation

With a commitment of time and effort, a dog owner can train his or her dog to become more than a pet. Training will help make a dog well behaved and easy to control. It will also allow owner and dog to form a bond and learn to respect each other. Obedience training is what makes the difference.

A commitment of 15 to 30 minutes a day, five days a week for about six weeks is generally required for obedience training. Both young and old dogs can be trained. The sooner the lessons begin, the sooner the owner and dog can begin developing a bonding relationship of mutual respect. However, obedience training for puppies should begin when they are 12 weeks old. Before this, they are not sufficiently mentally, emotionally, or physically developed for obedience training.

## Concept Development

Several basic concepts that a dog owner should know before beginning obedience training are as follows:

- Dogs respond best to positive methods of reinforcement, which involve using verbal praise and canine treats. When using verbal praise, learn to use an excited tone of voice, which gets the dog enthused. A



dull monotone voice will not motivate a dog. When using treats, break them into small pieces for quick consumption, so you can resume training quickly.

- Dogs have short attention spans and puppies have even shorter ones so 15- to 30-minute daily sessions work best for young and adult dogs. With puppies, you may find it best to break the working times into several short sessions spaced throughout the day.
- Take breaks. Do not hesitate to take a short break if the session becomes stressful. If you become frustrated or the dog becomes confused, it is probably an appropriate time for a break. Don't give up because the dog may believe that when it misbehaves during sessions, it wins.

- Take time off. Obedience training should take place five days every week. You and your dog deserve a day or two away from the training. This serves as a form of reward for all the hard work.

Finally, group sessions are an important part of obedience training. They are beneficial for several reasons: (1) they teach each dog socialization skills with other canines and new people; (2) they teach each dog that distractions (noise and activities) are normal and should not be a deterrent; and (3) working in groups allows opportunities for sharing ideas, experiences, and inspiration for each handler. Search the advertising section of your local phone book for a list of clubs or associations that conduct obedience training classes. You may find these listed under pets or kennels. Local pet shops are also good sources of information.

## Exercises

**Note:** Conduct these exercises with a collar and leash on the dog at all times. This allows you to always have control of the dog and enables you to pull the dog back if it should try to escape or lunge.

**Long downs:** The first exercise to teach a developing companion dog is the *long down*. This exercise has two major benefits: it allows you to establish dominance over the dog and it teaches the dog patience. The exercise starts by taking 5 minutes per day and then increases by 5 minutes each week. By the end of 6 weeks, the dog should be capable of lying in one spot for 30 minutes at a time. The exercise requires the dog to lie on the floor for a set amount of time. It does not matter whether the dog lies on its stomach or side as long as the dog remains in one



place and is not allowed to play. You can pet the dog during this exercise, which is often beneficial when teaching other exercises.

When first starting this exercise, the dog will not readily comply because this situation is considered a submissive position for dogs. With time, patience, and possibly holding the dog in place, you should overcome any struggles. It is acceptable to lie next to or over the dog to hold it in place. Remember to talk to the dog in a calm, soothing voice. This exercise is also an opportunity for the owner and dog to bond. At the end of the exercise, use a release word such as "okay" or "finish" in a loud, excited tone. Make sure to use an excited tone of voice as you give the dog lots of praise.



**Walking on a leash:** *Walking on a leash* is a good exercise to give the dog a workout and use some of its pent-up energy. Before beginning this exercise, consider whether you have an adequate

leash and collar. The primary considerations for selecting a leash are length and material. The optimal length leash is 4 to 6 feet; anything longer or shorter could cause problems. Choose a leather or heavy-duty fabric leash. Avoid using a chain leash because the noise the chain makes may distract the dog during obedience exercises. A fabric or leather collar that fits snugly is ideal.

Two types of metal collars are available: a choke collar and a pinch or prong collar. A choke collar does nothing more than choke the dog and is impractical to use. A pinch or prong collar is used as a last resort; it does not hurt the dog and is effective in getting its attention.

To begin this exercise, work with the dog either on your right or left, but remain consistent with whichever side you choose. As you prepare to move forward with the dog, use a loud verbal command such as "move" or "go." This signals to the dog that it is time to walk. Keep the dog by your side, not allowing it to

move out in front of or behind you. Use verbal praise to let the dog know when it is doing well, and say heel if the dog is lagging behind or moving forward too fast. You can pat the side of the dog's leg to direct it to its position.

Learn to use the leash as an extension of your arm to control the dog. If the dog is not walking alongside you, give the leash a quick, firm jerk or "pop." Leash work should be done on a loose lead, with the exception being the quick "pop" to bring the dog to heel. If the dog is constantly pulling and choking, he learns only to pull and choke.

During the first week or two, walking on a leash should be done in large circles or squares. With time, the walking exercise can include walking at a fast or slow pace, using verbal commands to tell the dog to speed up or slow down as appropriate.

Walking on a leash is fun for the owner and dog. With time, the dog will begin to enjoy this exercise. When the session is completed, make sure to use a verbal command such as "release" or "okay," and give the dog lots of praise using an excited tone of voice. Without releasing the dog, allow it to move about freely and give it lots of praise. As you and your dog become better at this exercise, the dog will be more easily controlled.

**Sit:** This exercise serves two purposes: it teaches the dog to *sit* on command and it makes the dog easier to secure in an emergency situation. Teaching a dog to sit on command allows you to readily gain control of the animal. For example, when a dog is in a sitting position, it is much easier to place a collar around its neck, attach a leash to its collar, or move it into the lying prone position if necessary.

Teaching a dog to sit is done by placing the dog at your side, issuing the command, then immediately reaching out and tucking one arm under the dog's back legs, causing its rear legs to fold; at the same time, lift up on the leash (behind the dog's head) to elevate its head. Another option is to use a dog treat. First, place a small treat in your hand and hold it securely at the dog's nose.



Tell the dog to sit, and slowly raise the treat directly up and over the dog's head. The dog should raise its head back and lower its back end. If the dog sits, give it the treat and lots of praise. As progress is made, the dog can be expected to sit and stay in position for several minutes before it is released, given a treat, and praised.

**Down:** This exercise is similar to the long down, but it requires that the dog remain in a prone position rather than lie on its side. This exercise also puts a dog in a more controlled situation. The *down* is most readily accomplished by teaching the dog to go from a sitting to a lying prone position. As the dog learns this exercise, it becomes easier to move it into the down position and have it stay for an extended time. It also helps in the long down exercise.



To accomplish the down, first place the dog in the sitting position. Then, with one hand on its back to discourage it from standing up, issue the command "down" and use your other hand to pull the leash down and forward, leading the dog into a down position. Do not require the dog to stay in this position for very long the first few times. With practice, the dog should be expected to stay down for 5 or 10 minutes.



**Come when called:** This exercise combines what has been taught from walking on a leash and sitting until released. It serves two purposes: it teaches the dog to *come when called* and, in an emergency situation where the dog is not at your side, it can help you get the dog back to your side quickly.

To begin this exercise, place the dog in a sitting position, then command it to stay. Walk a few feet out in front of the dog and then face it. If the dog moves during this process, return to its side, place it in a sit, repeat the stay command, and move out in front again. Tell the dog in a loud voice "come," and pull the leash and dog to you.

Give the dog a treat and lots of praise. Repeat this exercise until the dog's ability to stay improves, and then try moving farther away from the dog and repeating the exercise. Always remember to use plenty of treats and praise when the dog comes to you. This exercise may be important when you need to gain control of an escaped pet.

### **Making it work**

Initially, the *long down, walking on a leash, sit, down, and come when called* exercises appear to require a lot of commitment and time. In reality, they are very beneficial and rewarding when you realize all that has been accomplished. It is important to begin these exercises indoors and, as you become more confident in the dog's abilities, you can move outside. After all, new situations and environments act as distractions, but they are also true tests of a handler's and a dog's skills.

### **Conclusion**

Obedience training is a valuable experience and opportunity. Without it, a dog is just a pet. With behavior training, rewards and praise, time and effort, any dog will readily learn to sit, lie, walk on a leash, and come when called. When a dog is able to perform these tasks, it becomes an obedient dog and a source of pride and pleasure. While obedience training is an opportunity for a dog and handler to bond, it also has the potential to develop into more with additional training and participation in obedience trials.



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