

I Heard You The First Time! (I'm just ignoring you.)

Perhaps you can relate to this story. When my son became a teenager, I struggled to get his attention. No doubt it was because I wanted him to do his chores, and, whatever he was doing was much more interesting and fun than whatever I wanted. I found myself calling his name three or more times with my octave rising each time. So what did I unintentionally teach him? First that he certainly didn't have to pay attention until I said his name multiple times and raised my voice to the level of yelling. Second, I did this only when I wanted him to do something that he didn't want to do. Lastly, he didn't like me when I had worked myself into this state.

Remember our pups brains don't physiologically mature until around 24 months and therefore they are prolonged teenagers. Even if we have already poisoned out attempts to get and keep our dog's attention, there is a cure.

Just like when training a new behavior, re-training a behavior requires some basic steps, Getting a dog's attention is a behavior. We want our dog, on cue, to look away from what they are doing and focus on us. Just as we don't work for free, neither should we expect our pups to work for free. Our reinforcers for getting and keeping our dog's attention must always be of greater value than what they are focused on. In the house when our dog is relaxing, a smile, soft talk or caress might be adequate. But outside with squirrels running around, you might need to pull out the steak.

When I am teaching attention or re-teaching broken attention, I pull out my clicker (or use my unique word like "click") so my dog knows precisely when she does what I want. I will also start with using food treats. The more distracting the environment more valuable treats are required. Before attempting to get attention I will simply click and treat without saying anything so the dog will associate the sound of the click with a reward. I will refer to this process as Mark and Reward.

The three methods to teach behaviors with positive reinforcement are Capture, Shape and Lure.

Capture

Whenever our dogs are doing something appropriate all by themselves without us asking, we should acknowledge it. So, whenever our dogs simple look up at us and we didn't even call them, Mark and Reward. The reward might be simply a smile or sweet talk. This is what I call the **Automatic Check-In.**

Shape

When we ask for (cue) our dog's attention, we want them to reorient their head toward us. As soon as the head starts to reorient is when we Mark and Reward (I prefer rewarding them back close to me depending on the dog and circumstances).

What are the attention cues: **Name, Back-up Attention Sound, and Formal Name.**

Name

Say it just once, so they can hear you. Be patient, once they start to reorient their head Mark and Reward. Repeating the cue over and over may result in your dog becoming immune to the sound, a process known as habituation. If you have ever lived near train tracks, you know that eventually you become habituated to the sound and no longer hear it even though the sound never went away.

Back-up Attention Sound

It is absolutely guaranteed that your dog will completely forget their name at times. You know that moment when you see them saying to themselves, "that sounds familiar, but it can't possibly be me". Because we will only ever say our dog's name once, figure out a sound that will get their attention. It can be a whistle, a kissy sound or clucking noise. (Note: this sound must be different from the Mark and Reward sound.) When they blow off their name, rather than saying it again, use the back-up attention sound. As soon they start to reorient their head Mark and Reward.

Formal Name

This is to be used in only rare emergency-like circumstances. Your dog's name will probably work most of the time and now you have a back-up sound. But when it is urgent, like when your dog's collar breaks, you don't want to scream your dog's name, because they will think you are a crazy person and stay away. In those rare cases I use my dog's formal full name. I might say it louder, but by using the formal name I don't scream and with practice and sparing use, the dog knows that the situation is serious and should look to me for guidance and instruction.

Lure

Beside using our dog's name(s) or back-up attention sound, we should have an attention cue like **"Watch Me"**. To teach this, have your dog on a six foot leash holding it in one hand. Let them see that you have a cookie and toss it so they go to the end of the leash to get it while you stand still, saying nothing. Once the dog finishes chewing the treat she will look back at you thinking "hey, where's the next one?" When she looks back, Mark, take a few steps back and Reward back at your feet, Do this three or four times so she get to know the rules of this fun game. The next time you throw the treat out to the end of the leash, let her finish chewing, as she start to look back add the verbal cue "Watch Me", then Mark, take a few steps back and Reward back at your feet. As an alternative to dropping the treat at your feet, you can hold it up at you eyes, but if you have a jumpy dog make sure you feed them low or at your feet when they run back to you. As you progress, do this off leash inside the house and ultimately in your fenced in yard.

Reinforcers are all around us competing for our dog's attention. If my dog finds something in the environment reinforcing, and I want her to do something else, I must offer her a higher value reinforcer. In essence, I must out squirrel the squirrel.

Now, you and your canine partner get to have fun and play "The Name Game"!