

IMPULSE CONTROL EXERCISES

Airplane Food Drop

Remember when you were young and your parents “flew” spoonfuls of food into your mouth? (“Here comes the airplane, into the hanger!”) You can play a variation of this fun game with your dog. It will teach them that it pays to patiently sit and stay for good things to come to them, even when they think they could snatch them for themselves. To start, put a treat in your hand and hold it behind your back.

- Begin by asking your dog to sit and stay in front of you.
- Now raise your treat hand straight above your head. Your dog should be staring up at the treat. Now lower the treat quickly, keeping your elbow straight, down toward your dog’s nose. (It should take you five seconds at most to “fly” the treat down to their nose.)
- If your dog stays seated while the treat descends, praise them and keep lowering the treat toward their nose. As long as your dog stays seated, deliver the treat right to their mouth.
- If your dog jumps up and tries to snatch the treat before it reaches their mouth, quickly reverse direction and zoom your treat hand straight back up high over your head. Wait for your dog to sit down again, and then begin lowering the treat again. Keep repeating the immediate consequences of flying the treat up and away the moment your dog tries to grab it prematurely, and keep “flying” the treat down once they are reseated, until finally they stay seated the entire time the treat is lowered.
- The message you want to send to your dog is that if they stay seated, the treat will fly down, straight to their mouth, and if they can’t stay seated, the treat flies up and away. It pays to stay seated!
- When your dog can control themselves until you deliver the treat to their mouth four out of five times, make it harder by slowing down your airplane delivery. Instead of lowering the treat down to your dog’s mouth within five seconds, deliver it in eight or 10 seconds. The slower delivery will tempt your dog to jump up to get the treat. Be sure to fly the treat away the instant they try to jump for it.

A fun variation is a horizontal delivery, like a wrecking ball swinging in toward the dog’s nose horizontally, rather than the vertical airplane. Just be sure to swing your arm away each time the dog tries to grab the treat.

Dinner Time — Food Bowl Elevator

Similar to the Airplane Food Drop, you will practice patiently lowering your dog’s dinner bowl down to them as long as they stay sitting, and immediately raising the bowl up if they try to pop up. Wait for them to sit down again, then begin lowering the bowl again. As long as they stay seated, lower the bowl, then let them take it once the bowl hits the floor.

Over the course of practice, gradually progress to releasing your dog after you've put down the food bowl and stood back up. If necessary, break your standing back up into a couple of easier steps, like standing partially back up. Once your dog is successful with you standing all the way back up, gradually add more time before releasing them. Work up to a 10-second pause before letting your dog dig into dinner.

Sitting and Staying at Doors

Just like what you did at dinner time, say "sit" and "stay" just once. No need to nag — your consequences will clearly teach your dog what you mean. Open the door just an inch or two and see what your dog does. If they try to go through the door without your release, close the door quickly — but gently — in their face. Wait until they sit before you try again. When they can sit and stay until the door is open a couple of inches, praise them and let them go through the door with you.

Over many sessions, gradually increase the amount that you open the door: just a few inches at first, then a foot, then several feet, until finally you can open it all the way and have your dog sit and stay until you've released them. You can also build some duration by delaying your release cue for a second, then three, then five, then 10, and so on.

TIP: When you get to the point of opening doors wide, it's easier to use your body (rather than the door) to block your dog if they try to go through without your permission. Just quickly step in front to prevent them from going through — no need to yell or scold.

Sitting and Staying While You Attach Your Dog's Leash

Using the same method of delivering and withdrawing the reward, you can teach your dog to have some self-restraint when attaching a leash to their collar. Using this technique, you can get your dog to control themselves even when they're anticipating a walk — one of the highlights of their day — rather than bouncing around uncontrollably.

- Get out your leash and wait until your dog is calm enough to listen to you.
- Ask your dog to sit and stay. Then start to bring the leash toward their collar so that you can clip it on.
- The instant they get up, say "oops" put the leash behind your back. (Aim for sounding disappointed rather than angry. You just want to tell them that they blew it the instant they stood up.) Ask them to sit again and calmly wait until they do.
- Once they're sitting, start bringing the leash toward their collar again to clip it on.
 - If they stay seated, great. Clip on the leash and let them know it's okay to get up. Then go on your walk.
 - If they get up before you've clipped the leash on, say "oops" and withdraw the leash behind your back. Repeat this as many times as needed for your dog to get the idea that getting up before the leash is clipped makes it go away.

- Don't become impatient with your dog's early mistakes — they're learning a difficult task! With your quick and consistent consequences, they'll soon understand that they have to sit still in order for you to attach their leash. They'll be a pro in no time.

Auto-Sits

If you do the above four practices of sitting and staying consistently with your dog, you'll notice after a while that you don't even have to ask them to sit. When they see the food bowl, go to a door or see you pick up the leash, they'll automatically sit to get their reward, be it food or a walk.