

## Tips On Stays From The Training Sub-committee

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Before we deal with the specifics of how we condition our dogs to stay it is probably helpful to ponder a couple of general considerations. Some breeds of dogs are genetically programmed to be much more reactive to movement- in particular, working dogs or gun dogs, gaze hounds, terriers etc are much more likely to be triggered to react to movement than some other breeds. We should bear this in mind if we have a dog of this type and adjust our expectations to match. This might mean that we do not even step off from the dog initially but perhaps make a slight foot movement and reinforce the dog for not moving. The dog has to learn that he does not move at all when he hears the verbal signal 'stay'- we can't assume that the dog knows the meaning of that word. We build on the positive successes rather than have the dog associate the 'stay' signal with movement. The signal must be matched to no movement.

We can improve our chances of success by doing our stays where there is little distraction at first and also when the dog is more likely to stay.

If we practised our stays at the completion of a long walk or a swimming session, a tired dog is much less likely to want to move and more likely to stay successfully. Stays should be done off lead too, as we should be conditioning an entirely voluntary response on the part of the dog.

For learning to take place, we only have to pair our

signal (verbal and or visual) with the required response and then reinforce to sustain and strengthen the behaviour. As far as practicable, we should be aiming at 100% success so that we ensure consistency and confidence in the dog and its association of our signal and the response.

A couple of common mistakes that handlers make is that they have too high an expectation of the dog. They think that the dog should stay because it has been told to as if the dog understands the English verb 'to stay'. A dog's knowledge of grammar is not up to much. For success to occur and consequently for learning to take place, we need to progress at a rate appropriate to the dog. We want to ensure that the association of the 'stay' and the correct response is consistent. We definitely do not want the association between the signal and the response weakened through inconsistency. When we wish to terminate the stay it is important also that we tell the dog the stay is now over with a verbal visual signal consistently applied before the dog moves again. If we do not release the dog, every stay is broken because the dog is then determining when to finish the stay rather than being under our stimulus control. Even if using a clicker to mark the completion of the exercise, I would still recommend that you release him with a 'go free' verbal and visual signal as you will not always have a clicker with you

When teaching the stay exercise, handlers commonly step off four or five paces after a stern command 'STAY!' (often repeated another three or four more times to make it somehow clearer to the dog), and a policeman's gesture (again often

administered several times or alternatively continuously applied) and about turn to find the dog walking after them.

There are a few points to be made here:

We should give only one signal. At Kintala, we suggest in the beginning stages, that we use a verbal signal only for a couple of reasons.

A visual movement of the hand is more likely to induce an investigatory response (hence movement) and if the dog is initially conditioned to a verbal signal, it is easy at a later stage to introduce visual signals (even at a distance) by simply pairing the new visual cue or signal with the already conditioned verbal signal and then fading the verbal signal. The dog then drops or sits or stands or stays on the visual signal alone and does not creep forward in response to the hand movement.

Importantly, the verbal 'stay' signal does not need to be delivered in a forceful tone as you might often read about in some dog training books. A dog's hearing is at least four times more efficient than a human's. Once a note of force or coercion or dominance is introduced, the quality of the response is seriously diminished. Where fear is present, learning is adversely affected and even if the dog does not move, an unwilling, forced response is never the same as a voluntary, happy response. It also may serve to undermine the social relationship between the handler and dog.

A further problem in this scenario is leaving the dog four or five paces. What we should be aiming for is DURATION not DISTANCE. The further you go from your dog at this stage, the

harder it is for him to not follow you.

Where do you think more learning takes place? Thirty to forty seconds of no movement at one step from the dog and then being released or five to ten seconds of no movement and then breaking from position at five to ten paces?

If the dog is consistently not moving until being told to go free at the completion of the required time, it is a simple matter to extend the distance from the dog and still achieve consistent success.

Let us now look at the specifics of the STAY EXERCISE.

What we are concerned with is :

- SIT STAY
- DROP or DOWN STAY
- STAND STAY
- OUT OF SIGHT STAYS

#### THE SIT STAY

I generally condition the sit stay first because we usually condition the dog - especially if it is a naïve puppy- to sit before the drop. Dogs adopt a sitting position very readily so place your dog at a sit at side position before the drop stay is commenced. Keep in mind some of the general considerations we have been discussing e.g. initially practise with a tired

dog in an environment where there are few distractions. Consider your breed of dog. Don't start with an energetic Border Collie down at the park where there are swooping swallows.

With the dog sitting close to your left side, say the word 'stay' once only in a normal tone and volume and move your right foot a small distance to your right. We use the right foot movement as its movement is less stimulating (being further away from the dog than the left). We are trying to orchestrate the situation to maximise the dog's chances of being successful i.e he does not move when he hears the verbal signal.

This correct association of the signal and the response is vital.

Return to your starting point and if you have successfully paired your single, verbal signal with the correct response, reinforce your dog and immediately tell him he can go free as you cross your hands over one another in front of your body in a clear manner. Even if you are using a clicker to mark the end of the behaviour and the reinforcement to come, it does no harm to consistently release him.

The key to success in conditioning the Stay is to become a keen observer of the dog's body language. Remember we are aiming for successful pairing of our signal with the correct response. Once you are able to recognise the signs that your dog is restless or may be

going to move position, you are better able to achieve success by not pushing him beyond his limits and release him from the stay before he fails. If you miscalculate and he makes a mistake, immediately do a stay for a shorter period so he can be successful and we strengthen this behaviour with positive reinforcement. Raise your expectations in terms of DURATION of stay not DISTANCE but do not push him beyond the level of understanding that he is at.

If the dog is breaking from position when he hears the word 'stay', he is making an incorrect association. You have to lower your criteria or expectations to where he is successful. You will know your own dog and you will become more in tune with reading his body language. If you can continually build on successful responses while continuously raising your expectations, your dog will become more confident and predictable in his response. We could increase this success rate by giving him a jackpot food reinforcement as you progress so that he becomes more motivated to stay longer for that intermittent large reinforcement. I suggest you do not go much beyond one step away from him until your stay is predictable for say thirty seconds before you release him. It is a simple matter to gradually build on this distance because the dog has made a clear association of the signal with the response. In the early stages don't go behind the dog, move off too far or call the dog to you from the stay position.

Try to condition yourself to release the dog from whatever position you have placed him in if you are not going to immediately do something else with him. This is particularly important for the stay so that he is not the one deciding when the stay is over. If you reserve the 'stay' signal to mean that you are always going to release him he will quickly become reliable.

#### THE DROP OR DOWN STAY

Some dogs are actually more reliable in the drop or down stay position because they are more relaxed- especially if they are tired. This means that you might first condition this form of stay as the dog is more likely to be successful. In any event, once the dog begins to make the appropriate association that 'stay' means no movement on his part, he can begin to generalize from a sit stay to a drop stay or vice versa. Again keen observation of body language is the key to determining how quickly you can progress with building up first duration then distance. Ensure also that when you reinforce him, you do so low down so that there is no tendency for the dog to sit up to get the reinforcement. Reinforcing the dog several times while he remains down gives him a reason for staying down until told to 'go free'.

#### THE STAND STAY

This stay may pose some greater difficulties because the dog is already on its feet and inclined to change position more easily. He may also tend to sit because they are often conditioned well

to sit beside us. One way to keep the dog more stable is to initially stand the dog with just its front paws on a slightly raised surface. This can be a low step or even a front door mat. In this position the dog's centre of gravity moves forward to maintain balance and his back legs tend to 'lock' and prevent automatic sitting occurring. The same procedure of pairing the correct response to our verbal signal can be applied with the dog more stable. Once becoming predictable (which can be after two or three repetitions) we practise on a flat surface as normal.

We might need to lower our expectations of how quickly we move away from the dog in the stand position as it is more difficult to ensure a predictable response at the start. Remember that the more we can pair our cue with the response we are after the more we are communicating with our dog and the more learning occurs.

#### OUT OF SIGHT STAY

Once you are achieving predictable and consistent results in the above positions you might want to start conditioning out of sight stays. Leave your dog in your chosen stay position and then momentarily 'disappear' behind an object such as a tree or a corner of the house. The emphasis should be on momentarily going out of sight as you do not want the dog to fail.

This more difficult stay is really just another case of raising your criteria in terms of difficulty whilst maintaining success. We do not want to make this step up so difficult that the dog fails by coming to find you.

Once a pattern of behaviour like this occurs, the dog finds it very reinforcing to be re-united with you and like any positive reinforcement this incorrect behaviour will be strengthened. If this is happening make both the time you are out of sight and the distance you are leaving him shorter.

Another way to break this pattern of behaviour ( or habit) is to increase his motivation to stay. In other words for him to come to realise that it is more beneficial for him to stay. To do this, another person could initially induce the dog to maintain position with food inducement. The handler can then return to the dog after having successfully stayed and be reinforced again. Obviously the reliance on this second person has to be phased out.

Very often this can occur very quickly as the dog reaches an AH HA moment rapidly and learns of the greater benefit of not moving. Jackpot reinforcement could also be usefully employed here to interrupt the pattern or cycle of incorrect responses.