

PROTOCOL FOR TEACHING CATS AND DOGS TO “SIT,” “STAY,” AND “COME”

There are three signals/requests that, if your dog or cat knows them, will make your life a pleasure. In fact, in certain cases *these signals will save your pet’s life*. These signals are “sit,” “stay,” and “come,” and they are all easy to teach. If you teach your pet to respond to these signals early in your relationship, they can become the foundation for anything else you wish the pet to do and for further “collaboration and cooperation.”

Notice that here these signals are not called “commands.” Calling them commands puts us in an adversarial relationship with our pets. We don’t want this type of relationship. An adversarial relationship, coupled with the anger it often carries, is one reason why dogs and cats who know these signals choose to ignore them.

Humans act in a unique kind of social guardianship relationship with their pets, and so we should realize that our pets are totally dependent on us. We need to be patient and clear in our signals to our pets. It’s likely that our pets speak “human” better than we speak “dog” or “cat.” If we teach our dogs and cats these three basic signals as soon as they come to live with us, there will be no chance for them to learn undesirable behaviors.

Older, rescued, or rehomed animals can learn these requests, too, but it may take a little more patience. For animals with a prior history, positive reinforcement, praise, and rewarding what you want the cat or dog to do—not punishing what you don’t want them to do—are the keys to success.

Notice that this protocol can be used for both cats and dogs. Cats can be taught to “sit,” “stay,” “come,” “lie down” (or “down”), “roll over,” “salute,” give “high fives,” et cetera, just as dogs can, and they, too, will benefit from the mental stimulation. You may have to choose different treats for your cats than you do for your dogs, but many cats and dogs like the same things: cheese, liver, shrimp, sardines, and chicken. Tiny slivers of these are easy to prepare, cheap, and can be frozen in plastic bags to be available as “single servings.” Many cats love yeast spreads—Marmite and Vegemite—making tiny amounts easy to use as rewards.

Teaching “Sit”

The easiest way to teach a cat or dog to “sit,” “stay,” and “come” is to use food treats. Please consider using a food reward or salary, particularly if the dog or cat has been rehomed and needs to reshape behaviors. Many humans have a tremendous resistance to using food rewards for dogs. The charitable explanation for this is that they do not understand that a food reward is **not** a bribe, but rather a salary. It is important to understand the difference and to avoid bribes.

- A *bribe comes before* the desired behavior, as a lure to distract the dog or cat from a behavior we don’t like.
 - A *reward/salary comes after* a behavior is perfectly executed.
- Rewards show that when the dog or cat attends to our requests, we recognize his good behavior and provide him with an *earned* reward.

A reward structure sets the standard for compassionate, but disciplined guidance as part of guardianship or partnership relationship.

Food rewards may not be necessary to teach and enforce behaviors for dogs that already know how to sit—happy,

calm petting and praise may be sufficient. Food rewards can be extremely useful in teaching puppies who do not know how to sit how to do so. Puppies are babies and have short attention spans. Food will help focus them.

Few people teach cats to sit so even if you adopt a rehomed cat, no one has likely ruined the sit request for you.

If the food treat is held in one of your hands between two fingers, and if that hand is first placed in front of the pup’s (cat’s, kitten’s, adult dog’s) nose and then raised up and back, the pup’s head will begin to move to follow it. Gradually the pup will sit because it is easier and more comfortable to do so. If you say “sit (2- to 3-second pause), sit (2- to 3-second pause),” et cetera, while doing this, and as soon as the puppy accidentally sits, say, “Good sit!” and **instantly** give the treat, the pup will be reinforced in the appropriate time period.



Kitten being taught to sit using a table (for ease of reaching the kitten by the human) and a food treat.



Using a harness to keep a rescue kitten from roaming while teaching him to sit for a treat. As soon as the kitten’s bottom touched the floor, the treat was put into his mouth.

This pattern of behavioral requests, responses and rewards must be repeated until the puppy does it flawlessly and without hesitation. This will generally take less than 5 minutes for a pup or kitten that has not yet developed bad or inattentive behaviors. If you practice by asking the puppy or kitten to sit once or twice every 15 or 30 minutes the puppy or kitten will not forget what’s learned. Now, if you ask the puppy or kitten to sit for everything (e.g., to be petted, groomed, fed,

to have a leash put on, et cetera) you will have encouraged a very calming behavior and created a nicely mannered pet!

Is it necessary to push on the puppy's or kitten's bottom to "make the puppy sit"? **No**, and given how big we are and how small the puppies and kittens can be, it might be unwise to force them to sit. We could injure their hips or spines, and some breeds of cats and dogs who are predisposed for hip problem may have a special risk.

There are **at least three other choices** for teaching "sit," **none of which involve force**. Here are three suggestions.

1. You can gently put a hand behind the kitten's bottom. As the kitten backs up, their bottom hits the hand. Now you can gently shape the kitten to sit for a reward by following the instructions, above, by having the kitten follow a treat. When the head is tipped up, the kitten moves down and back. If it is not possible to move back because of the hand, the kitten will sit.
2. You can have another person stand behind the pup with their feet near the pup's haunches; as the pup backs up the person's feet and legs will shape the puppy's body in the sit position. This technique also works for cats.
3. A head collar can help you to teach puppies to sit and may help with big, fast, or overly exuberant pups. More information on these pups is found in the handout **Protocol for Choosing Collars, Head Collars, Harnesses and Leads**. This technique is the only one that is difficult to implement for cats because there are no great kitty head collars, but a good harness can at least prevent a rambunctious kitten from running and help her to focus.



Using an older dog as a model to teach "sit" to a 9.5-week-old puppy.

Teaching "Stay"

While cats tend to stay and observe more than dogs do, "stay" can still be more difficult to teach than "sit" because we humans forget that puppies and kittens have a different attention span than we do. We want our pets to learn more quickly than they are sometimes able.

There is a lot of variation in dogs' abilities to relax and stay, and we often, without realizing it, give inconsistent signals with our body language. For example, most humans talk to dogs over their shoulders as we walk away and then wonder why the dog did not "stay." Dogs who do not know "stay" won't learn it if you are walking away when you are talking to them. They will, instead, follow you. If we become angry, the dog becomes scared and we did harm, all because we didn't understand how dogs read body language! When working with animals, children, your friends, and yourself, try to remember that the first and most important rule is **do no harm**.

Starting to Teach "Stay"

First, your dog or cat needs to know how to sit.

If your dog is physically more comfortable lying down, that's fine. If you decide to show the dog in obedience, you will soon enough teach him that "sit" and "stay" differ. We want the dog in a posture of "deferential" behavior, where he is calm and can pay attention to you.

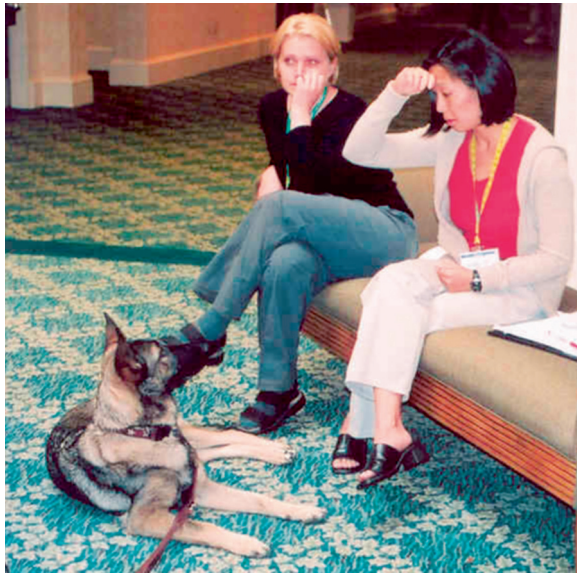
Sitting is a less reactive posture than is standing, lying down is less reactive than is sitting. Some dogs are calmer or more comfortable when lying down, so this is the preferred posture for them. Please keep the age, physical condition, and attention span of your dog or cat in mind when asking him to assume any posture. Cats can have hip pain and dysplasia as do dogs, so the position requested may affect compliance.

Next, ask your dog or cat to "sit," verbally praise him, say "stay," and take a tiny step—a few centimeters—backward. Almost instantly repeat "stay," go back to the dog or cat, repeat "stay," and reward. A sample sequence looks like this.

"Bonnie—sit—good girl! (treat)—stay—good girl—stay (take a 2-cm step backward while saying "stay"—then stop almost instantaneously)—stay Bonnie—good girl—stay (return quickly while saying "stay"—then stop)—stay Bonnie—good girl (treat)—okay (is the release and she can get up)!"

Note the Following

1. Please use your dog's or cat's name—this will get her to attend to you. You can use your pet's name frequently, unlike in obedience, **as long as she is paying attention to you**. Pets who have not been taught to ignore their names will look at you when you use their names. If your pet doesn't look at you immediately when you say her name, put the treat near your eye. You need her to focus. Ask her to "look" when the treat is near your eye. If you do this regularly, your dog or cat will begin to look to your face whenever you say the word "look." Watch the video, *Humane Behavioral Care for Dogs: Problem Prevention and Treatment*, for a demonstration of how to do this. If your dog or cat has learned or been taught by yelling to ignore you, you may need another sound to get your pet's attention. Try clicking with your tongue, whistling, et cetera. Failing this, clickers are commercially available that are not so loud that they startle anyone as a whistle might.
2. Repeat the requests/signals as the dog or cat requires and when she is paying attention to you. With improvement, you will repeat the signals less frequently and at greater intervals. This is a process known as "shaping" behavior.
3. Reward your dog or cat appropriately: use small, high-quality treats **every single time** he exhibits the desired



Here, the person is teaching the dog to look at her and be calm while lying down. Some dogs, like this one, are calmer when lying down than they would be when sitting.

behavior. Eventually, the food treats will appear less predictably, but we learn best when we are rewarded every time we do something right.

- Remember to use one or two words consistently as a releaser (e.g., “okay,” “all done”). Then remember that if you use those words while talking to your dog, he will get up. If he gets up before being released, ask him to “sit” and “stay” again, and wait 3 to 5 seconds—without a treat—then repeat “stay” and treat. Now you can either continue with the practice session or release the dog or cat. By repeating the “stay” signal and having a very short interval where the pet is not rewarded until the second “stay,” you will prevent jack-in-the-box behavior that will otherwise accidentally be taught by rewarding the dog or cat every time she sits, regardless of staying.

As your pet becomes more experienced and masters staying at a short distance, **gradually** increase the distance between you and your dog or cat. **Do not** go from having your pet stay within 1 meter of you to walking across a 20 meter room. This is too great a distance and too quick a transition for a cat or dog who may not be sure what you want. The temptation will be great for you to do this, but remember that **this isn’t about you: it’s about teaching the dog or cat to be less anxious**. If you move too quickly, you have just signaled unclearly and provoked anxiety.

You can also practice these signals on lead, using a head collar or a harness (but see **Protocol for Choosing Collars, Head Collars, Harnesses, and Leads**). Using a head collar or harness permits you to reinforce sitting long-distance and to more quickly “correct” the dog or cat if he gets up. A note about “correction” is essential.

- The “correction” we are talking about here is not brutal; it’s a gentle “un-uh” or any soft sound that will allow your pet to stop and look to you for cues about what he should be doing. A harness and a lead allow you to slowly and gently keep your pet’s attention so that he can again focus on the task. Think of what you need as an interruption

that encourages the animal to look to you for further information.

Remember that the younger the dog or cat, or the longer you have been working in the session, the shorter your pet’s attention span becomes. If you find that your pet is making more mistakes as the session progresses, you are better off practicing for a few minutes 6 times a day rather than once a day for 30 minutes.

Teaching “Come”

“Come” is the easiest of the requests to teach because it uses your dog’s or cat’s natural curiosity and willingness to follow you. If your pet is older, you may be able to accomplish this as simply as starting with the animal sitting and paying attention to you, and then your walking away while patting your thigh and saying “come!” in a happy voice. You can make the transition more clear by sitting with your cat or dog, using a treat to encourage him to “look,” and then getting up and moving away as discussed while holding the treat at his eye level.

Young puppies and kittens can be taught “come” almost instantly. All you do is have them “sit,” stand right in front of them, take one step back and say “come,” and as soon as the puppy or kitten stands they will have “come.” Reward and praise them! You can then walk slowly around patting your thigh and doling out treats while repeating “come.” If your dog or cat is doing this well, you may want to add the signal “wait”: All you have to do is stop, say “wait,” and put your hand out, palm facing the pet. After your dog or cat has paused, tell him he is brilliant, and resume the “come” sequence with the rewards.

You can use a leash to make sure the puppy or kitten cannot run off, but if your puppy or kitten walks away and doesn’t respond to “come,” just ignore him. **Do not** tug on a leash or collar or drag the dog or cat: dogs and cats push against pressure so if you drag them there is pressure on the back of their neck. This pressure will make them stop and stay away from you, not come to you.

If you continue to use a technique that is not working you will confuse or scare the pet. If after starting over a couple of times you still cannot get the pet to pay attention to you, leave it for later. Puppies and kittens have short attention spans. You will gain more from working with your pet in many small bursts than in one long one.

A Cautionary Word on Food Treats

Remember that the treats are to be used as a salary or reward—**not as a bribe**. If you bribe a dog or cat, you are sunk before you start. *Bribes* come *before* the dog or cat executes the desired behavior to lure him away from an undesirable behavior; *rewards* come *in exchange* for a desirable behavior. It is often difficult to work with a problem dog or cat who has learned to manipulate bribes, but there are creative ways around this.

First, find a food that your pet likes, and that he does not usually experience. Suggestions include boiled, slivered chicken or tiny pieces of cheese. Boiled, shredded chicken can be frozen in small portions and defrosted as needed. Individually wrapped slices of cheese can be divided into tiny pieces (0.5 × 0.5 cm) suitable for behavior modification

through the plastic, minimizing waste and mess. Whatever you choose, the following eight guidelines apply:

1. Foods that are high in protein may help induce changes in brain chemistry in some animals that may help with relaxation.
2. Dogs and cats should not have chocolate because it can be toxic.
3. Some dogs and cats do not do well with treats that contain artificial colors or preservatives.
4. Dogs or cats with food allergies or those taking medications that are monoamine oxidase inhibitors (MAOIs) may have food restrictions (cheese, for dogs taking or using MAOIs such as Anipryl and Preventics collars).
5. Dog biscuits and dog and cat kibble generally are not sufficiently interesting for learning new behaviors but some foods are so desirable that the dog or cat is too stimulated by them to relax; you want something between these two extremes.
6. Treats should be tiny (less than one-half of a thumbnail) so that the dog or cat does not get full, fat, or bored with them.
7. If the dog or cat stops responding for one kind of treat, try another.
8. Do not let treats make up the bulk of the dog's or cat's diet; they need their normal, well-balanced ration.

The Reward Process

There is an art to rewarding dogs and cats with food treats. Learning to do so correctly will help the dog or cat to focus on the exercises and will keep everyone safe. If you keep the already-prepared treats in a small cup or bag behind your back, or in a treat bag at your waist, you always have easily available treats. By keeping only one or a few treats in your hand at a time, you will be able to prevent dogs and cats from lunging for treats. The hand that you will use to reward your pet can then be kept behind your back so that the dog or cat doesn't stare at the food, or you can move your hand to your

eye so that you can teach the pet to look at you. The food treat must be small: the focus of the pet's attention must be you, not the food. Bring your hand, with lightly closed fingers, to the dog or cat, just under his mouth and open your hand flat. You want to move quickly enough to ensure that your pet gets the reward a second or two after successfully completing the task, but not so fast or forcefully that you scare or threaten your pet. Animals who have been hit or beaten may need to have the food treats gently dropped in front of them at first. Otherwise, they may shy from the hand with the treat.

Avoiding Problems

Please do not push or pull on your dog or cat or tug on her collar to get the dog to sit. These types of behaviors can be viewed as challenges by some dogs and may make them potentially dangerous. Use the methods discussed above.

Please do not wave your hands or the treat around in front of the dog. This will just act as a distraction and confuse the dog or cat. Part of the point of this program is to help your pet become calmer and less confused. Excitable behavior or unclear signals can make your pet more anxious. This will not help. If it is important to you to use hand signals, these can be added later. *Please do not try to do everything at once.*

Please be calm. Your dogs and cats will make mistakes. This doesn't have to reflect on you. Problem pets and new puppies or kittens require a lot of patience. The people who have the most success are the people who work the hardest and the most consistently.

Finally, **please remember** that we and our pets all learn best when we are rewarded every single time we perform the new behavior. We remember the new behavior if we practice it often, and get the rewards. We retain that memory best when the rewards are intermittent. Rewards should **only** become intermittent or sporadic after a long period where the behaviors were perfectly performed. Be generous and clear. You will benefit from a closer, kinder, and less-stressful relationship with your pet.