
EYE CONTACT

Teach the Puppy to Pay Attention to You

Teaching the puppy to make eye contact with you is fundamental to teaching the puppy to pay attention. When the puppy is paying attention to you it is much easier to teach them, and you can teach them just about anything. On the other hand, when the puppy is not paying attention to you it becomes very difficult to teach them anything at all. Teaching the puppy eye contact is the beginning of teaching the puppy to focus on you. It is the foundation of all future behaviors you will teach the puppy.

Playing the Eye Contact Game

To begin you will need:

- A hungry puppy
- Yummy Treats
- Reward Marker (the word “Yes!”)
- A quiet place to train

Stage One: Glancing

With a treat in your hand, touch the puppy’s nose with the treat (or hold it close enough so they realize you have it) then draw the treat upward to the side of your head and outward. The puppy will look at the treat. Wait. Eventually the puppy will get impatient and glance at your eyes. At the exact moment the puppy’s eyes meet yours say “Yes!” and follow up by giving the treat to the puppy. Continue at this stage of the game until the puppy is choosing to glance at you immediately after you hold a treat out to the side of your face.

Important Points to Remember

- When you first begin teaching the eye contact game you may have to wait for a long time before you get a glance from the puppy. Be patient. The puppy will become impatient and eventually glance at you.
- If the puppy becomes bored and looks away from the treat and does not glance at you, then begin again by bringing the treat down to the puppy’s nose and back up and out again.

- Do not use any leash correction to prompt the puppy to pay attention. Doing so defeats what you are trying to teach.
- Do not use a verbal command, make attention sounds or prompt the puppy at this stage. You want the puppy to voluntarily glance at you.
- At this early stage of the game the puppy may be sitting, standing, or lying down.
- After the puppy gets the idea, it is no longer necessary to begin by touching the treat to the puppy's nose. You may start by just holding the treat out to the side. As the puppy gets the idea and becomes quicker, hold the treat out at arm's length.
- The treat is intended to be a distraction. You are beginning to teach the puppy to choose to look away from the distraction and to choose to look at you instead.
- Make sure that you clearly say the reward marker "Yes!" before you move the treat towards the puppy to reward them. You want the word "Yes!" to become a marker to the puppy that a treat will always follow every time the puppy hears that word.
- Limit your training sessions to short periods of no more than a couple of minutes each.
- Don't forget to have fun!

Stage Two: Commitment

Now that the puppy is choosing to glance at you quickly, the next stage is to hold out for an eye contact commitment from the puppy before you say the marker word "Yes!" and reward. Begin by holding the treat out to the side of your head at arm's length. When the puppy glances at you do not say "yes!" immediately. The puppy will more than likely glance back at the treat and then back at you and then back at the treat and so forth. The puppy will shortly decide to stop glancing back and forth and will commit by looking at you. Wait for only one second of commitment, say "Yes!" and reward with the treat.

Important Points to Remember:

- The puppy should commit to gazing into your eyes.
- Increase the time of commitment from one second to two seconds and so on slowly. This is known as raising the criteria. Try to always progress forward with the criteria, rather than ask for 2 seconds on one round followed by one second on the next round.

- Move the treat to different positions, i.e. over the puppy's head, under the puppy's chin, etc. Each time you move the treat to another position, lower the criteria to one second again and raise the criteria slowly. From the puppy's point of view, the treat held in a different position is a totally new exercise and a new learning experience for the puppy.
- Put the treat in the other hand and again slowly raise criteria.
- The eye contact game should now be done with the puppy in various positions such as sitting, standing, and lying down.
- Play the eye contact game in different locations such as different rooms in the home or different places like on the sidewalk, in a library, etc. Lower your criteria for commitment at first and then raise it slowly as the puppy succeeds.
- Always set the puppy up for success. Always raise the criteria slowly.
- Don't forget to always clearly say the reward marker word "Yes!" prior to moving the treat towards the puppy to reward.

Adding the Command "Watch"

You may choose to introduce the word "Watch" after the puppy can do the eye contact behavior well in different locations for extended periods of time (twenty to thirty seconds). Proceed as follows. First say the command "Watch". Pause for a slight moment and then follow up by giving the puppy the familiar physical cue of moving your hand with a treat out to your side at arm's length. After a second or two of eye contact commitment say "Yes!" and reward. Continue the procedure of saying the command word "Watch" first, followed by the familiar physical cue. After a number of repetitions the puppy will begin to choose to offer eye contact before you can follow up with the physical cue.

Important Points to Remember

- Once the puppy is responding to the command "Watch" don't over-use the command. Do not let it become a nagging command, which your puppy will want to avoid. Keep your tone of voice happy. The puppy should look forward to hearing the command and eagerly choose to offer eye contact.
- If you have to say "Watch" more than once and you get no response from the puppy, you need to back up in your training. Go back to using your physical cue and progress slower.
- Always keep eye contact training fun! Set the puppy up for success. Success and fun will create a state of mind in the puppy that doing this is cool. The puppy will always look forward to offering eye contact. The puppy will begin staring at you all the time (which can be eerie).
- Always reward the puppy anytime it chooses to offer eye contact. Doing so will strengthen the behavior.

- You will need to teach the command word “Watch” in many different locations. Each new place is a new behavior to the puppy. Dogs, as a species, do not generalize well.

Lifestyle Rewards

After the puppy knows the eye contact game, rewards for eye contact do not need to always be treats. Rewards can be praise and petting. They can also be functional rewards, or lifestyle rewards. For example whenever the puppy wants to do something such as come out of its crate, go outside and play, get out of a vehicle, etc., you should first ask for eye contact from the puppy with either your physical cue for eye contact or the “Watch” command. The puppy should offer an eye contact commitment of several seconds until you give the reward marker “Yes!” and then let the puppy have the opportunity to do what it is they wanted to do as a reward.