

Teaching ‘Down’ and ‘Stay’

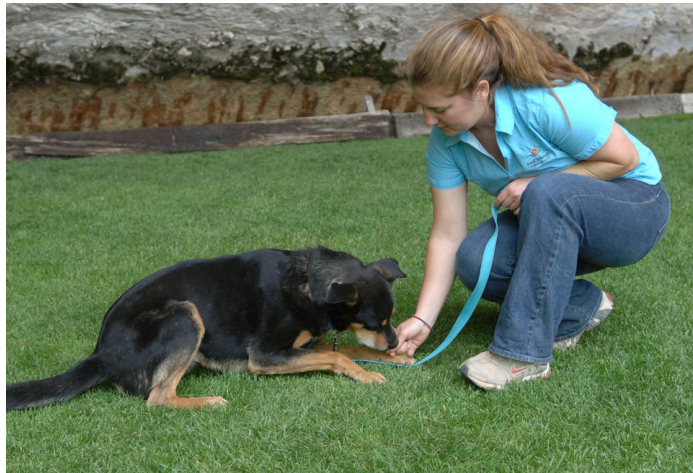
By Sherry Woodard

“Stay” is a lifesaving cue to teach all dogs. When can “stay” save your dog’s life? Whenever giving the cue would prevent your dog from making a mad dash out the front door, the car, or the backyard gate. Stay is a cue that many people forget to practice – and without practice, your dog may not have this skill when it truly matters.

Prepare yourself for the lesson with pea-sized treats in a treat pouch you wear and/or a favorite toy tucked in your pocket. Select a place with few distractions. I offer a flat pad or mat for the dog to lie on. I think it helps communicate to the dog that if he moves from that spot, he will be going back and trying again before a reward comes his way. For the dog’s comfort, I teach him to stay in a “down” position. He can wiggle in a “down” without leaving his stay, whereas wiggling in a “sit” or “stand” often means leaving the desired position.

Down

If your dog doesn’t know “down,” here’s how to teach him: Start with the dog sitting in front of you. Hold a treat near his face, then move the treat down toward the floor. Wait a moment, holding the treat close in to the dog’s body, then move the treat slowly away from the dog. Be patient with this exercise – it may not work perfectly the first time. If the dog gets up instead of lying down, try again. Once the dog lies down, praise him and give him the treat.



When the dog is consistently doing a “down,” add a verbal cue (e.g., “down”) when the dog is lying down. If you start giving the cue before the animal is doing the behavior, the dog will not clearly associate the cue with the behavior. Instead, get the behavior first and then start giving the cue while the dog performs the behavior. Gradually move the cue back in time until you are giving the cue before the behavior. If done correctly, this is an easy way for the animal to learn that a particular cue is associated with a particular behavior.

Stay

To teach “stay”: Have your dog lie down. Put one hand out toward him and say “stay.” Give a treat quickly, before he moves. He may then get excited and stand up. Have him lie down



again and repeat: Say “stay” and give a treat quickly so he gets the idea that the treat is given only when he is down.

Then, start lengthening the time before the treat is popped into his mouth. I start using a release word to indicate that the dog may move. In fact, I use the word “release” because it is a word not often used in casual conversation. Once your dog is waiting consistently in a “down,” move one step away before stepping back and giving him the treat. Use small steps for best results. I continue this process, gradually increasing the number of steps back, until I have the dog waiting for a treat while I leave the room and return.



If your dog is high energy or easily bored, you can start the lessons with a tether on him so he cannot move away. If you started with a tether, remove it once you have a brief “stay.” If your dog needs many lessons with the tether before he has the self-control necessary to do a “stay,” don’t worry. Some dogs need more time to get the idea.

Remember to keep all learning as fun as possible. Use a happy tone, be patient, and keep lessons short and frequent.

Sherry Woodard is the animal behavior and training consultant at Best Friends. She develops resources and provides consulting services nationally to help achieve Best Friends’ No More Homeless Pets mission.

See also: [Why We Use Relationship-Based Training](#)
[Teaching Your Dog Basic Cues](#)