

Distractions and Discriminations

By Nancy Gyes, photos by Marcy Mantell Photography



The pups are growing up! Each morning I expect to open the cage and find an adult dog rather than the pup that went to sleep in that crate the night before. Too bad they cannot stay pups forever. I love training all the new behaviors, and watching the progress they are making. The pups are now gangly five-month-olds—all legs, and not much coat.

Taking It on the Road

Sweep earned his first dog show ribbons the last two weekends. He got blue ribbons in dog show manners, hotel stays, elevator rides, and meeting new people. He slept quietly in a crate in the hotel room, just like he does at home. During the show he spent time in his ex-pen, chewing on a meaty bone, or napping in his kennel in the car. Jim took him for walks with Spy and we both spent training time with him as well. Because our canopy and car were at ringside this past weekend, we placed him in the vehicle each time we competed. For now we are working hard to prevent his learning how exciting it is to watch us run agility with our adult dogs. We keep him away from the rings and give him bones to take his attention off the surrounding excitement while we run.

Sweep's training at the show was very similar to what we do with him at home. We practiced heel work, positions (sit, down, stand) and stays and had many play sessions. The sessions were short, no more than 5 minutes, and usually focused on just one skill each time. When training more than one skill we separated the training with a play session. At no time while having Sweep on leash was our attention ever distracted from teaching and

rewarding him for good behavior. If we did not have time to train, reward, or play, then he was in his crate. We give our total attention and focus to Sweep when we are training him and this is what we expect from him in return.

Back at the Ranch

Sweep still earns a portion of his daily food allotment while training, and eats the balance in a bowl in his crate similar to our adult dogs. We use his kibble as well as cooked meats as treats.

At no time is Sweep allowed to run around unrestricted inside our home alone or with other dogs. His behavior is always monitored. Sweep is rewarded for almost every single behavior we ask him to perform, like getting in and out of the crate and going both in and out of all doors. If we call him and he comes instantly he is rewarded, always. Every sit, down, and release cue is rewarded if he quickly responds to our command. We are not casual about giving commands, and he in return is not lax in responding.

Control the Environment

Remember: Always be in control of your environment. When you work with your pup, you can control the environment to a degree by having your pup on a leash, working in a small room with the doors closed, or training in an enclosed yard. If you allow other dogs to be present when you are training, they should be trained dogs that will come when you call or lie down on command. If your pup is distracted or will not come when you call, you can make the situation worse by having other dogs running around out of your control as well.

Currently I am working on quick response and complete understanding of the behaviors to which Sweep has already been introduced. For his *core behaviors*, like recalls, sit, down, stand, close, side, and hand touch, I try to remember to use all positions around him and all locations where I can ask him to do these skills. I want Sweep to take these positions *fast*. Before I am able to count “one-one thousand” he should have responded to my verbal cue. He is expected to continue sitting without moving at all until released while we mark and reward with treats.

Sit Training Exercise

Before I started adding little distractions and different handler positions, I checked to see if Sweep understood the basic cue and behavior and would hold the position for a minimum few seconds of duration. Right now I am not telling Sweep to stay, just to sit (down or stand). I will add the word *Stay* later on in training. Here is how you would start the skill training session of the sit behavior with your own pup.



Step 1

Think of 10 different places in your training room, house, or yard to practice this skill. You will move quickly from one place to the other, but each location should be at minimum 10' feet from the last one. Have some cookies, a clicker if you use one, and a toy in your pocket, not your hand. It works well to have to different kinds of treats, soft and tasty ones to reward the sit, and something a bit lower on the delicious scale, like kibble, to reward the release. This training session will be short and you are going to *rush* from one place to the next. Put your pup on leash.

- Stand perfectly still, don't wave your cookies, say *Sit*. Mark (click, *Yes, Yeah!*) the response the moment his rear hits the ground, and immediately give him a cookie. Praise for a few seconds while giving at least two more cookies while he is sitting.

- Try not to get into a pattern of where you are standing relative

to your pup when you ask him to sit. Be random by having him on both sides as well as in front of you.

- Without moving any part of your body, give your verbal-only release word and expect your dog to jump out of the sit position. Reward the release with another cookie.

- Now run with your pup to another location and repeat the drill. Try to do 10 places within 2 minutes. At the end of 2 minutes or 10 spots, have a good game of tug.

Problem solving

If your pup failed to respond to the sit cue quickly most of the time when you gave your command, then repeat the drill, but this time do all the sits in one familiar location in your home. If you believe your pup understands the cue word *Sit*, then you will need to reward only the sits that he performs quickly. With a young puppy if I get a slow response to a command, or no response at all, I immediately move the

pup a couple of feet away from where I asked for the sit, then I ask again. Once you are getting good, quick responses then try the Step 1 of the exercise again, and evaluate your progress at the end.

Did your pup sit quickly each time, but fail to jump out of the sit each time you gave your release cue? Take a short break then go practice your release skills as described in the March issue of *CR*. Decide at the end of the session which parts of the training you need to focus on in your next one. Train in short 2 or 3 minute sessions and have a game of tug between each one. Generally you should do just 3 or 4 short sessions that last no more than 1 to 3 minutes each time. Then put the pup in his crate and start over again after a short rest. Between each "set" you can refill your pockets with cookies, as well as plan and organize what you are going to do differently next time. Practice this exercise in all your pup's positions (sit, down, stand, close, side).

As you repeat the drill you will have to think on your feet. Slow releases? Next time reward *those* with the better treats. Slow sits? Mark/reward quickly the next time his rear hits the ground. Decide which parts of the behavior need work.

Adding duration

If you have heard of the three Ds of stay training, you know that you need to start adding them one at a time: Duration, Distraction, Distance. If you can do Step 1 of the sit training exercise, then you are ready to move on. We regularly practice stays with Sweep staying in position for at least 1 minute, but he does not need to wait a full minute to get reinforced. We try not to get into a distinct pattern of reward. If a reward is delivered every 4 seconds with no variation, for example, the dog will be patterned to stay that long and no longer unless he is rewarded.

Don't Forget POPP

Plan
the training session, including where you will go while practicing the sits, what you expect your pup to do when you say sit, and what you will do if he doesn't.

Organize
all the items you will need (clicker, cookies, toy).

Potty
the pup on leash away from the training area (make it a quick one before you start).

Play
tug in the training area for at least a minute to get your dog engaged for the upcoming training session.

Step 2

Start in a familiar environment, I like to do this in the kitchen because I can see the kitchen timer. I use kibble for this training because the pup is getting so many rewards. Count out about 15 pieces into your hand. Set the timer for one minute and ask your pup to sit. Immediately mark/reward with a treat, then wait 3 seconds, mark/reward, drop back to 2 seconds, mark/reward, then wait 4 seconds, mark/reward, then drop back to 3 and wait 5 seconds. You want to use up most of your cookies. Release your pup and play. Now evaluate your results.

Really Important Stuff

The click or mark does *not* end the behavior. If you mark while your dog is sitting, he should stay sitting while you deliver the treat. If he moves after you mark, then you might have waited too long to deliver the treat, delivered it in a way that encouraged him to move, or he has not been taught to wait until a treat has been delivered to his mouth. Your pup should wait for the treat to come to him rather than moving toward you to grab his reward.

Problem solving

What to do if the pup moves before the release: First, *wait*. Just stand there to see if your pup will sit again. If he does, praise but wait at least a few seconds before you reward. If you wait and he is totally distracted and does not sit on his own, ask him to sit but count at least to 3 or 4 before you reward again. If you can't get that far, reward every couple seconds for a sit-stay that lasts no longer than 30 seconds.

Being able to count to 3 or 4 while Sweep remains sitting is his *baseline* for a sit-stay. I rarely reward below that level unless I am working on quicker responses to the cue to sit, and not for lengthening the time he remains sitting. Sweep now needs to perform essentially above the baseline to earn rewards for staying in position.

Step 3

Same drill as in Step 2, but now you will ask the pup to stay in position for more seconds *before* you mark the behavior. Cue sit, praise, count to 4, mark/reward, count to 3, mark/reward, count to 5, mark/reward. Bounce around or ping-pong the interval time the pup must wait for the reward. You could reward as quickly as after 3 seconds or as long as after 10+ seconds. Do the exercise in 3 or 4 locations for 30 seconds in each place. Don't forget to reinforce your release with a treat or a short tug game. If your pup moves when you hand him a cookie, practice the treat delivery exercise described below.

Start mixing up the stay exercises by marking at various times. You can mark quick sits then reward and start adding duration, or you can withhold the first mark when his rear hits the ground and praise/mark/reward after a short duration of the sit.

Start adding play as the reward for release at this time as well. This is a great way to switch back and forth between food and toys. Reward your pup while sitting with treats, and as soon as you give your release word, say your word to cue your pup to grab the toy. I say *Get It*. Just holding the toy in front of your pup should no longer be permission to grab it. It sounds like this: *Sit, Yes, (food reward), Okay, Get It*.



The easiest way to add distractions is to have them come from you rather than outside sources. There are two different aspects to the training. One is that the pup is learning to respond to the *Sit* cue while you are already in different positions. The second is that the pup is learning to stay in a sit while you move or change to another different position around him.

Step 1 Sweep is on leash. He is on my left, on my right, or facing me. I kneel, stand, crouch, sit, or lie on the floor. My hands are behind me, on my hips, on my head, arms crossed, neutral at my side, pointing to the ground. These are ways that I stand *before* I ask Sweep to sit. Try putting yourself in every one of the positions described, ask your pup to sit, and then mark and reward the moment your pup responds by sitting. He should sit the moment you ask; if not, you will have to train the sit from those positions longer and more carefully. For instance, if I kneel and then ask Sweep to sit and instead he lies down, then first I will wait to see if he comes up into a sit so I can praise. Next I will start over but only in a crouch, not kneeling, and then slowly move to a kneeling position after a few successful reps. Reward every single time your pup takes the position quickly after you say *Sit*. After you have fully trained these scenarios you should stop rewarding the slow sits or ones where the pup takes a different position before sitting. Just move your pup and ask again.

Step 2 After your pup sits, *move* to one of the positions described above. If you are kneeling, then stand up. If you are beside your pup, move behind him. Try just one new move, then mark and reward. I mark when I move to the new position and then move back to the pup to reward, or reach to the pup's location and feed with his head facing forward, which is what I call *sitting in neutral*. *At this point in the pup's training I always move close to the pup again, either at his side or facing him, before I say my release word.*

Step 3 Cue *Sit*, then lavishly pet and praise when the pup is in his position. Mark and reward for no movement when you are praising and petting, and then use your toy as a reward after the release.

Step 4 Move to a few different positions during each stay. Hesitate at each new position, mark and reward, take a new position, mark and reward, then move again. Your pup should stay in position after you mark and wait for you to quickly deliver the cookie reward. *The click or mark does not end the behavior, nor does the food.* The release word ends the behavior of sit, but don't forget that you are using a behavior to end a behavior and that the release is also rewarded.

Do all the stay exercises in the sit, down, and stand positions.

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Treat Delivery Exercise



We have taught Sweep to stay in position (sit, down or stand, close or side) without moving when we give him cookies. I like a little game that my student Moe Strenfel plays with her dogs and teaches in her classes; some trainers call it Doggie Zen. This game teaches the dog to wait in position for the cookie to be delivered. Don't mix up this exercise with Step 1 of "Sit with Distractions." Train Doggie Zen at a different time.

- While your pup is in a sit, hold a cookie between your forefingers and *very* slowly move the cookie toward your pup to feed. If he moves even slightly, like shifting his feet, pull the cookie away, then start again moving the treat *slowly* toward your pup. Don't let go of the treat until your fingers are making contact with your pup's mouth, and be ready to draw it away if you see the slightest motion. Feed one cookie each time the pup is able to stay motionless and wait for the treat arrival.
- Approach the pup with the cookie from all sides as well as directly over his head. *Don't wave the cookie back and forth*; use a slow deliberate approach to your pup's mouth. Don't correct the pup if he moves; just remove the treat. If he gets out of the sit position, re-cue the sit. If your pup keeps moving or can't earn a treat this way, you have made it too difficult. Start with the cookie closer to his mouth, and just move a short distance so he is able to succeed.
- Now try this while your pup is lying down or standing.

Cue Discrimination

We know what discrimination means in agility: the dog must respond to our cue to take the correct obstacle when there is a choice to be made. In training your pup the first discrimination you will teach is the understanding of your verbal commands. Remember, each time you cue a sit, then a release, you are working on two separate behaviors, and you are asking your pup to discriminate between the words he hears and respond correctly.

Until you can accomplish Step 1 of the "Sit Training Exercise" and your pup is responding to a position cue (sit, down, stand), you should not be asking him to do more than two behaviors at one time (for example, sit and release or down and release). Do not add a third or fourth by doing: a sit, then a down, a release, a stand, a close, then sit, and so on, until he has a good understanding of each one of those cues individually. Once you have a few of the positions well taught you can switch back and forth and see if your pup can *discriminate* between the cue words like sit, down, release, and stand.

Training Reminders

Here are the training reminders we have posted on our fridge this month.

- Recalls
- Stays
- Cue discrimination
- Heel work
- Using the Dremel on nails

Don't forget to post your own reminders for current training objectives, and have a great time with your pup this month! Next month: Jump bumps, adding distance, targeting, and more distractions on stays. 🐾

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