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Spy Kids

Training New Behaviors, Part 1

By Nancy Gyes, photos by Marcy Mantell Photography

The Spy kids are now 12 weeks old. Jim's puppy Sweep is playful, energetic, and attentive. He seems to learn everything quickly, aided I believe by the early clicker training. The skills he understands and performs with competence are recalls, hand targeting, sit, down, the release cue (which ends almost all behaviors), kennel up, door manners, take the toy or leash to tug or retrieve, attention, and balance work. Now we are focusing on: handling of all types (physical handling, not agility handling!), using the Dremel tool for nails, walking at our side, lengthening the time he stays in a position (for example, sit, down, and on a mat), and lengthening the time he stays in heel position at our side, both standing still and moving.

Jim is doing a wonderful job with his puppy. I train him just enough to see how he is responding to cues, and introduce new behaviors so that I can write these articles. It would be difficult to write a story about training a puppy without actually doing so!



The Release

My release is more like a recall. On the agility start-line, it means, "Get up fast and take all the obstacles between us." From a specific position, it means get up and move toward me and is rewarded as often as I reward any other behavior I ask him to perform. The release is a specific behavior that is probably used more than any other skill since you end almost *all* behaviors with your release behavior. For example, the verbal cue *Sit* starts the behavior; my release cue *O.K.* ends the sit behavior. The better your dog's understanding of what ends a behavior (the release cue), the easier it will be to teach him to continue doing that behavior until he hears the release cue.

One of the first skills Sweep learned was his release from position with the cue *O.K.* Which is taught first, the movement (release) or the position (stay in a sit or down)? I always teach a release *before* I introduce a position like sit or down. The release is a specific behavior, and if you treat it as one, it will be easier for your

dog to understand it. I use the cue *O.K.* because it works and is what I have always taught, but there is a good argument for using a word other than *O.K.* for your release. One of my students uses a different word for each dog. It makes control in a multiple-dog household much easier if each dog does not respond to another dog's release. *O.K.* is also used often in our common conversation with one another. Consider carefully what release word you will use with your pup.



I taught *O.K.* by first calling "puppy, puppy." Sweep ran to me and I held the cookie reward at knee level for him to jump up and eat. As he jumped up I clicked. He ate the cookie and was still leaning on my leg. I shuffled my position, he slid off and I called him again. I clicked as he jumped up and fed

him with his feet on my knee. I repeated this sequence a few times and then stopped calling him. He wanted another cookie so he automatically jumped up; I clicked when his front feet touched my leg and again fed him by my knee. Very quickly he learned that jumping up earned a treat. I repeated the sessions over a couple days, then started adding the cue just as he put his feet on me.

As the dog jumps up and his feet are on me, I give my release word then click/treat. I did that approximately 30 times. Then I changed to saying the release word when he just began to leave the ground, (30 more reps). And then I started saying the word when I was certain he would jump up (more reps). At that point I started using his verbal cue *O.K.* to have him jump up on me. I rewarded him for jumping on me (unless I had used his release word to end a behavior like sit or down or to get out of his crate).

I teach a word to end a behavior, to "release" the dog from sit or down or to ask the dog to come out of a crate, by teaching the dog a specific behavior in response to that word. I have

chosen to have the dog put his feet on me for a response to my cue *O.K.* You may choose a different behavior to pair with your release word (such as the dog's nose touching your knee or the dog's jumping in the air), but it must be a behavior that forces your dog to get out of a position, even a stand position, to perform the behavior. For example, if standing up is your release behavior, and you are also teaching your dog the stand position, there is not enough difference between the behavior of stand and the release of stand up.

When non-specific movement is a criterion for a release, often the dog will not move when hearing the cue for the release. When the dog sits directly in front of you, he is already close to your leg. You must have a behavior which differentiates between stay in the sit versus get out of the sit. For the dog to truly understand the release behavior, he must be taking a specific action and I've chosen to have Sweep jump on my knee.

You can later modify the behavior of jumping on your knee if the dog is too

rambunctious. After you have true understanding of the skill, reward the release close to your leg while the dog's feet are on the ground, before he gets a chance to jump on you. When teaching the cue for the release I am extremely careful to teach it, and to ask for the behavior, while I am standing completely still.

No Wiggling Exercise

During this handling exercise I expect Sweep to stay in a position at my side, without struggling, while being touched and examined. The dog needs to be on leash for the exercise. I kneel on the ground with the leash tucked under my knee. I set a bowl of treats out of his reach off to my side, where I can pick up one cookie at a time. I do not want food in my hand. If having the bowl of treats on the floor beside you is too distracting for your pup, put the bowl on a table, but within reach. You can use a clicker, but I find it challenges my dexterity too much while doing these exercises.

I use the marker word "Yes" or just quietly praise when Sweep tolerates my touch. I pet him gently down his back with my left hand for just a couple seconds while my right hand holds the collar. I say *Yes* the moment he stops wiggling;



then I exchange hands with my left hand holding the collar as the right reaches for a treat and hands it to him. I switch hands again and repeat many times.

Next I gently lift him to a stand with my hand under his belly and tickle his belly gently. I am also whispering a calm *Good Boy* while he stands. I say *Yes*, change hands, feed, change back again, and repeat. I lift a leg from the elbow, mark it with *Yes*, release the leg, change hands, feed, change hands again, and repeat. If holding the leg was okay, then I move farther down the leg this time (mark, reward) then move my hand to his foot (mark, reward).

I put my hand on his back, pet all the way down his back, and gently tuck him into a sit by folding him into the position with my hand below his rump. Never push on your puppy's rear to get him into a sit. I do not use any words to cue positions like sit, down, or stand. Those positions are taught with the clicker when the dog offers the behavior. This exercise does not teach your dog to sit, stand, or down; it teaches your dog to tolerate handling and be rewarded accordingly.

The sessions last about 5 minutes. We do these when Sweep has already been out for some

exercise and play, not when he is amped and wants to wiggle. Handle in all ways and positions (sit, down, stand). Touch your dog's face, ears, mouth, teeth, and each leg from top to foot; rub the foot gently and separate each toe and rub it gently. I do the outside left legs when the dog is on my left and the right legs when he is on my right. Be sure to rub gently between the back legs, and touch the privates. Every time the pup tolerates your touching a part of him, he is marked and rewarded while he is tucked into your side.



Sit

Sweep has a reliable sit and down on a verbal cue with some duration. I taught the sit while I stood with Sweep on a leash beside me. I moved forward a couple steps with him. He stopped and looked up; I clicked and handed a cookie high over his head, which encouraged him into a sit. After moving another couple steps, I repeated the click and feeding high; very quickly he was sitting when I stopped moving. I started giving the *Sit* cue just after he sat (30 reps), and eventually just as he was sitting (30 reps). Then I cued him just as I thought he would sit (30 reps). I found it helped to move around with him a bit to get the sit, perhaps because we had been rewarding attention and his looking up was a logical step: Head goes up, butt goes down. I clicked and treated every sit just as his rear made contact with the ground.

A Note on Clicker Use

Do you need to use a clicker? Absolutely not! But training your puppy will be more efficient if you at least use the principles associated with clicker training. Learn more about using a clicker before you try it on your pup. You can also use a perfectly timed "marker word" like *Yes*, or you can just put a cookie into your dog's mouth without speaking a single word if you time your treat delivery to coincide with the exact portion of a behavior you are teaching.

To learn more about clicker training, operant conditioning, and how your dog learns, explore these two books from renowned dog trainers, who also just happen to be at the top of the sport of agility as well. This month's must-reads include Susan Garrett's *Shaping Success, The Education of an Unlikely Champion* (Clean Run Productions, 2005) and Pam Reid's *Excel-erated Learning! Explaining (in plain English) How Dogs Learn and How Best to Teach Them* (James & Kenneth Publishers, 1996).



Next I stood still and asked for the sit, rewarded it with multiple cookies, and gave my release cue *O.K.*; he jumped up and got another cookie. I clicked only the sits, but rewarded both sit and the subsequent release *O.K.* with cookies. He already knows the release so I do not need to click that behavior unless it gets a bit rusty. I will, however, reward almost every release with at least a piece of kibble. I reward the behavior I am currently training, sit, with multiple cookies, or higher level cookies. The release gets lower level or fewer cookies. His sit training looks like this; commands are in *italic*: *Sit*, click, treats, *O.K.*, kibble. It looks like jumping jacks when we practice quick sits and releases. I want them fast and I try to click quickly, and hand the cookie equally fast.

Down

I taught the down while kneeling in front of Sweep on the floor. I watched him for a moment, looking for some tendency toward dropping his head, and as he did so, I clicked and placed a cookie between his toes. Before he finished eating the cookie and while his head was still down, I clicked again and repeated it a few times with the treat. The next time that I clicked for his looking down I held the cookie between my fingers on the floor until he had to *almost* lie down to get it, then I let him have the treat. From there it was just a couple minutes at most until he volunteered to lie down, and I could click after he was fully down. Soon he started to offer to lie down whenever I was kneeling or sitting in front of him. To get him out of the down position and *reset* to start the skill practice again I either used my release word *O.K.*, or I threw a “reset cookie” off to



Placement of Rewards

All recalls, hand targeting, and heelwork on both sides are rewarded right at knee height with cookies or toys. We encourage the dog to end up in a position that is headed the same direction as our feet are pointed. We discourage his crossing either behind or in front of us in recalls and while playing. This choice, teaching him to always remain close to your leg and headed in the same direction you are traveling, makes a big difference when you begin moving groundwork with your dog.

Sweep is always rewarded in the position we want him to be in, even if he moved away from the position after we marked it. On recalls if he stops short of us, he would not be fed while standing at a distance. If he wants the treat, he must come to our leg. When teaching walking at our side, we mark when he is in position; if he moves away after the marker, he has to come back to our leg to get the treat. I call it feeding the imaginary dog. Good clicker trainers refer to Bob Bailey's saying about reinforcement: “Click for action, feed for position.”

the side so he had to chase it and then return to me to earn cookies for lying down again. I added the command *Down* the same way as I did for the release and the sit (30 reps after he was down, 30 reps just as he was about to down, and 30 reps as I was certain he was starting to down).

My position on the floor was a huge cue for Sweep to down. The first time I was standing up and gave the *Down* cue, he just looked at me. I waited silently while he thought about it, and rewarded him when he figured it out.

To add duration (length of time the dog stays in position) to the sit and down I just kept clicking while Sweep was in position

almost as fast as I could click and treat and repeat. Then I moved to marking it every few seconds and treating, and now I praise Sweep while he is in position and continue to lengthen the time between clicks and treats. The most important part of getting Sweep to do a behavior or stay in position for a longer time is *not* to mark his getting *out of* and *moving back into* position.

The following method is incorrect: give *Down* cue, dog downs, click and reward, praise dog for staying; dog gets up, then he goes back into his down and you click/treat again when he downs. If I clicked and treated when he went back into a down, Sweep would only

learn that to earn treats he must first get up and *then* lie back down. If he can hold a 5-second down but gets up at 2 seconds to earn another cookie, on the next repetition he must down for at least 2 seconds again before I reinforce.

Loose-leash Walking in Heel Position

You can apply the same process to walking on a loose leash. Staying at your side while moving is just an extension of the duration of heel position at your side while you are standing still. I like to count steps while training this. I start by rewarding every step I take with the dog at my side. I feed him while still moving, which actually gets me another step forward while he is eating. Once I can go a few feet while rewarding each step, I begin rewarding after two of my steps, and subsequently after three, four, and so on. If my dog pulls out of position and then returns to my side, he will need to stay by my side for another two steps again before I reward (if I am at the two-step level). Otherwise the dog learns to hit the end of the leash, come back, and get rewarded for doing so. To earn quick rewards, he figures out that going to the end and returning is what is rewarded. You will never progress with loose-leash walking when you reward your dog for pulling and returning instead of staying by your side for longer periods of time without pulling.

Hand Targeting

Sweep hits his nose on our open palm *hard* and we mark and treat with a cookie that I drop quickly into the same hand, now a cupped palm. You may also reward with your opposite hand (directly in front of your target hand) if your dog



Introducing Distractions to Training

becomes sniffy after you have had a cookie in that hand. Target training can become difficult if the dog wants to sniff while I am training the behavior.

We started by just holding out a hand and when he looked at it, we clicked and treated as described for sits and downs. Subsequently he moved closer to the open palm and then we eventually waited and did not click till he touched it with his nose. Now if he hits it weakly we do nothing but hold our hand in place and wait for him to hit it again hard. I use the command *Here* for hand targeting. I don't know how I ever raised dogs without this skill. Sweep learned it at about six weeks of age; I use it daily with him and with all my dogs.

Sweep is learning to take verbal cues and do behaviors when there are a variety of distractions. I can have our dogs on down-stays and ask for his attention while walking, or do short duration sit- and down-stays around the other dogs.

We interact with him while there are fun things going on around him, *but those fun activities are not personally directed toward him.* If either Jim or I have Sweep in the training yard while classes are going on, our students are polite and basically ignore him so that they are not sabotaging our efforts to keep Sweep's attention on us. He is fed and played with while he is accepting these distractions. We want him exposed to people and places but the reinforcement for tolerating or enjoying the environment comes from us.

Sweep is moved farther away from any nearby distraction if he is unwilling to take cues or play with us. We move closer to the distraction as his attention returns to us. It might take you a few minutes to get your own pup's attention in a novel environment, but if you don't have it, *leave* the scene until you do, or put your pup away.

Sweep met one of our student's children this past week. Liam has no interest in looking at or interacting with Sweep, which is just perfect! A neutral child that does not grab at him or squeal with excitement is just what I want. I acted like Liam's shadow and rewarded Sweep for staying close or sitting while I followed Liam around. Stay in charge of distractions and rewards around kids and strangers and other dogs. Don't depend on others to reward the correct way for polite and friendly behavior from your pup. 🐾

Training Collars and Other Devices

Whenever we are working with Sweep he has on a collar and a leash. We only use a flat buckle collar with Sweep (as well as our adult dogs). If you are physically challenged or have a strong-willed pup you cannot control, perhaps you might consider a training device. My first choice (if necessary) would be to use a training harness (not a tracking harness) that tightens when the dog pulls. You can also make a figure-eight harness from your dog's leash by wrapping it under your dog's neck and one front leg to discourage pulling. Your pup should still wear a buckle collar while using the harness. Head halters have enjoyed increased popularity over the last few years as the designs seem to have improved. Head halters cause discomfort across the bridge of your dog's nose when the dog pulls and force him to turn his head toward you if you are behind or beside him when you apply pressure. All training devices should be used extremely carefully, for a limited period of time, and only with the guidance of a professional dog trainer.

The benefit of using correction devices is that you can enter environments that are above your dog's threshold for distractions, instead of manipulating the environment and building your dog's self-control over time slowly by rewarding good behavior. Unfortunately that is the good as well as the bad news.

Nancy Gyes and her husband Jim Basic run Power Paws Agility in San Jose, California. She is the AKC World Team Coach for 2006 and has been on the AKC World Team seven times, four years with Scud and three with Riot. Nancy and Riot finished 1st in 2002 and 2nd in 2001 in Individual Agility classes at Worlds. Nancy also won the USDAA Nationals four years in a row, 1998 to 2001, with three different dogs, Scud, Riot, and Wicked. In 2001 and 2002, Nancy and Riot were the 24" jump height AKC National Champions. Scud retired in 2001 after winning the USDAA Veterans Championship. Contact Nancy at www.powerpawsagility.com, where you can also view other articles and videos.