



# *True North Training*

## Ask The Trainer: Training For Distractions

### **QUESTION:**

I signed my dog up for training classes, and overall we are doing okay in class. He is great when we are at home and nothing much is going on. But I am still having trouble getting him to pay attention, both in class and when we are out in the real world. Do you have any tips that might help me improve his behavior in more distracting settings?

### **ANSWER:**

This question frequently comes up in training classes, and you are actually pretty fortunate that your dog is doing okay for you in the very distracting classroom setting. That is usually the place where things tend to fall apart when your dog is learning new things, just because the baseline commotion level is usually pretty high in a room with multiple dogs and people. Let's face it, the lure of the great outdoors or a busy training environment can be very distracting.

As with most training problems, this one can be troublesome because it is generally multi-faceted and requires some attention to detail to solve it. There are several issues to consider here.

First of all, ask yourself what you are bringing into the training environment that will motivate your dog to work for you. Does your dog prefer food treats or playing games with you? If your dog prefers food treats, have you taken the time to figure out which ones he'll turn himself inside out for, and which are good enough to eat but don't keep him watching you for more? If he's a dog that prefers to play games (tug, fetch, chasing soap bubbles), which ones really keep his attention? What about activities? Which ones does he prefer (these could be things as simple as getting into or out of your car or taking walks, or as complex as playing hide and seek with you or hunting for hidden objects using his nose).

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Secondly, you need to ask what your dog's natural tendencies are. Is he the kind of dog that lives through his nose (like, say, a Labrador retriever or coonhound) or do visual things tend to get his attention (like a greyhound or many terrier breeds). Does he tend to be fairly independent, or does he stay close and engage with you often? Is he very active or somewhat laid back?

Third, you must ask what foundation behaviors you have in place that are transferrable from the home environment to other places. Typically, there are five key behaviors that all training classes build from: Attention, Heel, Come, Sit, and Down. Of those five, most dogs learn sit better than all the rest because most handlers reinforce that behavior more than the rest. You can test it at home – which of the behaviors does the dog do immediately when asked, and on which does he comply slowly or not at all? The ones with the best (most consistent and frequent) history of payment will be the easiest for your dog to respond correctly when you're in more distracting settings.

Finally, you must ask yourself hard questions about your own teaching behavior. The five foundation behaviors should each be very strong, reliable and quickly produced on request in the non-distracting setting before you expect the dog to respond correctly when you're Out and About. If they are not, you need to ask yourself why they are not. Is it too early in your class sequence to have had time to practice yet? Or is it easier and more self-reinforcing for you, the trainer, to practice the behaviors your dog does easily? If you feel that you're tending to work more on behaviors the dog is good at, you may want to make a chart and keep track of how you spend your training time. How many repetitions of down are you getting in a minute-long training session? Is your answer better, the same, or worse than it was yesterday? Does your dog seem to enjoy folding into a down, or is he slow to get his elbows on the floor when you ask him for the behavior? If the answer is "he's slow...", what can you do to make the training game for that behavior more fun for him? Does he need a better reinforcer/payment than he's been getting? Or does he just need more practice?

Now that you have a better idea of how well your pooch is actually performing, you can decide how to practice when you take him to more distracting training spaces. If your dog is reliable about responding on "Sit," and "Come" (meaning he does them immediately and enthusiastically when you ask for those behaviors at home), but not so much on "Down" and "Heel," then "Sit" and "Come" would be the best behaviors to work on in the more distracting setting.

Make sure that you bring a variety of reinforcers (toys, treats, etc.) that your dog *will* work for in the more distracting setting. Having a number of different ways to tell your dog he did well greatly improves your chances of getting the behaviors you want consistently. Getting surprised by multiple really positive outcomes is fun for almost everyone; your dog will benefit from it as well. Expect to think in terms of re-training even these very reliable behaviors in new and distracting settings. Assuming you have a paycheck your dog likes well enough to work for, if he's not responding the way you see him respond at home, he may not perceive that your command means the same thing in this new and distraction-rich environment. Dogs are pretty poor at generalization, so give him the benefit of the doubt. Work in settings that have lower

level distracters first, and as your dog gets better at responding quickly and enthusiastically in those situations, gradually increase the level of the “noise” (visual, auditory, or aromatic) and continue to expect well-polished behavior.

Keep your training sessions short (anywhere from 30 seconds to 5 minutes, depending on what you are working on), and take breaks in between. Allow your dog to relax and just hang out with no expectations from you for about one or two minutes in between active training sessions.

Finally, **GET THE BEHAVIOR!** If you’re not able to get your dog to do what you’re asking at all, bag your training session! There is no point in allowing him to self-reinforce on his own agenda if he has no motivation or interest for what you’re asking him to do. Always remember that your dog is always learning. What are you teaching him? If you’re not teaching him anything at all, he’s still learning, *but not within the sphere of things you had wanted him to learn from you*. Remove him from the situation and consider how to change things up so you can improve your likelihood of getting and keeping his attention. Do you need better treats? Better baseline foundation behavior at lower levels of distraction? Did you skip the “re-training in the new environment” step so that your expectations a little too high? Did you accidentally choose a space that is, for example, extremely visually stimulating for a dog that is very visually oriented? Try to imagine the world through your dog’s eyes, and then adjust accordingly.

Training should be fun for both you and your dog. If you find neither one of you is enjoying the process, you should ask yourself how to fix that!

