

Teaching Eye Contact

Of all the gifts a dog can give us, one of the most powerful is their willingness to offer us eye contact. A dog that chooses to look at their handler is saying, "I'm listening, I'm with you, your guidance matters to me." At a fundamental level, we need to earn that respect by being fair, consistent, engaging and clear in our expectations and dealings with our dogs. However, we can also encourage and reinforce a dog to look at us, or "check in," and we can actively train a dog to get in the habit of making eye contact.

Capturing eye contact

Voluntary glances: A simple and effective way of reinforcing eye contact from dogs is to capture and reward those voluntary glances they often give us when we're walking them, standing at a curb, or just hanging out with them. We frequently miss these glances because they can be very subtle. So we need to become expert watchers for even the smallest flick of an eye toward us. The glance may not be as direct as looking up your face, it may be sideways at your knees, but you want to acknowledge it with a click or verbal mark, and reinforce with food. Let your dog know how pleased you are when they choose to look at you, and you'll find that they'll start making eye contact more frequently and directly.

Stand and wait: This is another exercise that works well with dogs that are very distracted by their environment and disinclined to look at you. You can do this inside or outside, but choose a quiet spot with minimal activity to begin (you can practise in more distracting environments later). Have your dog on leash, holding it about halfway along, so the dog is not too close or too far from you. Stand firmly in place, ignore the dog (but watch them out of the corner of your eye), say nothing, and wait. If the dog moves around, don't move with them; stand still. Be patient; initially, you may have to wait a few minutes for your dog's response. Eventually, they will look up at you as if to say, *Well, when are we going to walk? What's going on? At which point, you click or say, "Yes!!!"* and give them an excellent treat. Do this on subsequent occasions and your dog will get faster and faster at checking in with you until you can eventually stop using the food.

Teaching a "look" cue

Ideally, begin this training exercise after a walk or play session so that your dog is relaxed. At a minimum, give them a pee break beforehand. Choose a calm and quiet environment, preferably indoors, to start. Keep sessions short, but you can practise them frequently. Look for responsiveness and consistency before advancing to more challenging steps. Backtrack to a previous step if necessary. Each dog is different in their ability to learn. Some dogs will pick up "look" very quickly and you can move through the steps in one session; others will take longer,



and you need to know when to stop the training on a successful note and come back to it another time. It's not a race.

Have your dog on a drag leash in front of you:

1. Put a tasty treat in your fist or between your fingers and hold it to your dog's nose for a few seconds so they detect it.
2. Fully extend your hand with the treat out to the side at shoulder height.
3. Your dog will likely be focussed on your hand with the food. They may sit, lie down, bark, jump up, paw at your hand, attempt anything that may get them that treat. If they present polite behaviours, wait them out to look away from the hand toward you. If they present inappropriate behaviours, you may allow them only a few moments of this so they realize it will not get them the treat; pull your arm back, hold the hand with the food against your middle, and repeat steps 1 and 2.
4. If the dog is presenting polite behaviours, continue to wait patiently for them to look away from your hand in your direction. When they do, immediately mark and reward them with the treat in your hand. Repeat the exercise and continue to mark and treat them for looking away toward you. After they successfully do this a few times, increase the challenge by waiting for them to give you even the briefest eye contact, then mark and reward.
5. As you practise this step of making eye contact, begin to look for a reliable response rate (i.e., 4 times correctly out of 5 or more) and a decrease in the time it takes your dog to look from your hand to your eyes. At this point, begin to add the verbal cue "look!" at the exact moment they look away from your hand and at your eyes.
6. Now start building duration of eye contact. Once your dog looks at you, wait for them to hold their gaze for increasingly longer stretches of time before you mark and reward them; for example, you might wait for 5 seconds, then 10, then 30, then up to a minute and more. Continue using your verbal "look!" cue at the moment they look from your hand to your eyes. *Remember, you do not need to accomplish all this in one session; read your dog and know when it's time for you to stop.*
7. Once steps 5 & 6 are occurring reliably, begin to cue "look!" to your dog without extending your hand or treat. See if they have associated the cue with the behaviour. If they make eye contact, immediately and enthusiastically mark and reward. If they don't make eye contact when cued, backtrack to steps 5 and 6, and build on them.
8. Begin to generalize the "look!" cue in different environments, gradually raising the criteria by adding distraction and distance. You can use the cue to improve your dog's focus skills or when anticipating, preventing or interrupting reactive behaviour.

In general, dogs that tend to be nervous or are easily distracted, or those that are slow to trust due to their individual histories may find it harder to make direct eye contact and will need lots of encouragement and reinforcement when they do.

