

Stay – The 4 Ds Duration, Distraction, Distance, and Diversity

Stay seems simple but is actually a complex behavior involving many variables. To ensure success, you must build from the ground up. It is critical that you set your dog up for success by gradually increasing the difficulty of the behavior.

Stay means freeze in that position and do not move until I release you. Regardless of changes in the environment, your dog should hold his position until released. It is critical that you utilize your release word consistently, EVERY TIME, so your dog knows what to expect. In Intermediate class, we will add the 4 Ds to this cue, which will help build reliability. Remember, never call your dog to come to you from a Stay. This can increase your dog's anticipation and may cause them to break Stay prematurely. Always return to your dog to release him so he knows his job is to stay in position until you come and get him.

In Puppy/Beginner class we introduced the cue Wait, which is a much more relaxed cue than Stay. Once reliable, it ensures that your dog knows to pause and wait for further instructions. Ultimately, once reliable, we can pair it with Come When Called as we build distance in Intermediate.

When teaching a reliable Stay, it is important that you set your dog up to win. Remember, if he breaks Stay, YOU did not ensure success. You could have asked for too much duration, your criteria could have been too high, or maybe your rate of reinforcement was too low. **Build your Stay gradually.** Do not increase your criteria until your dog is performing the behavior consistently, at least 4 out of 5 attempts. You may have to reduce the environmental distractions as well. For example, practice at home, in a quiet room, instead of at the park. You may also need to increase the rate of reinforcement. For example, reward every 3 seconds instead of every 10. You can't simply jump from 5 seconds of duration to 3 minutes, or work at a distance of 2 feet then immediately move to a distance of 30 feet. You must work in gradual approximations and consistently reinforce each step of the process.

Keep in mind that Stay can be extremely boring for some dogs. Never in the history of Dogdom has self-control or impulse-control been the fun thing to do. Especially when working with younger, boisterous dogs, try for a few successful attempts, then end on a good note. You want to finish before the dog loses focus, so he doesn't start associating Stay with being a boring, repetitive task. As humans, we tend to see success and want to drive harder and achieve more. This can create frustration in your dog and can actually end up ruining your Stay cue. Once your dog has a negative association, when asked for Stay, he may show signs of stress, like lip licking, stress yawns, random grooming and may even begin to avoid the cue. Stay is like Monopoly – you probably enjoyed playing it for short periods as a kid, but as an adult, you may feel like flipping the table over and sending the game pieces flying. Why is that, you ask? Because nothing is fun after hours and hours.

Once you have created a solid basic Stay, it is time to focus on adding the 4 D's to Stay. Stay should be taught in stages. Build one D at a time. Before you increase Distance, ensure that your dog understands the concept of extended Duration. Be sure your dog has been successful prior to moving on to the next D.

Duration is the amount of time the dog is expected to perform Stay. Duration should always be the first D you add. Build Duration gradually, and always quit while you're ahead. Gradual increase of Duration and a consistent, high rate of reinforcement is key.

Distance is the amount of distance between you and your dog during Stay. Utilize yo-yo rewarding to build distance. You're assuring your dog that you will ALWAYS return to him while he's in Stay. Begin by only taking one step away from your dog. After two or three successful repetitions, add another step building distance gradually. When starting from Heel position, sometimes pivoting in front of your dog to face him before moving away can help him understand your expectations. Again, building Distance one step at a time will help build reliability.

Distractions are anything that competes for your dog's attention. The goal is for your dog to be able to maintain Stay regardless of happenings in the environment. START SMALL! Start with simple sounds and movements around your dog. You could cue Stay and bend to tie your shoe or have a friend come up and speak to you while your dog maintains Stay. Do not forget to praise and reinforce success. If not reinforced, the dog will not understand the future expectations.

Diversity is the where and when the behavior happens. If your dog has mastered Stay in PetSmart and at home, begin building Diversity in different environments. Help him generalize that the cue still means the same thing, regardless of where you are.

Remember, if you are doing everything right, your dog should rarely break stay. With proper use of your release word and consistently setting your dog up to succeed, you will see Stay progress quickly and become a reliable and useful cue.

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