

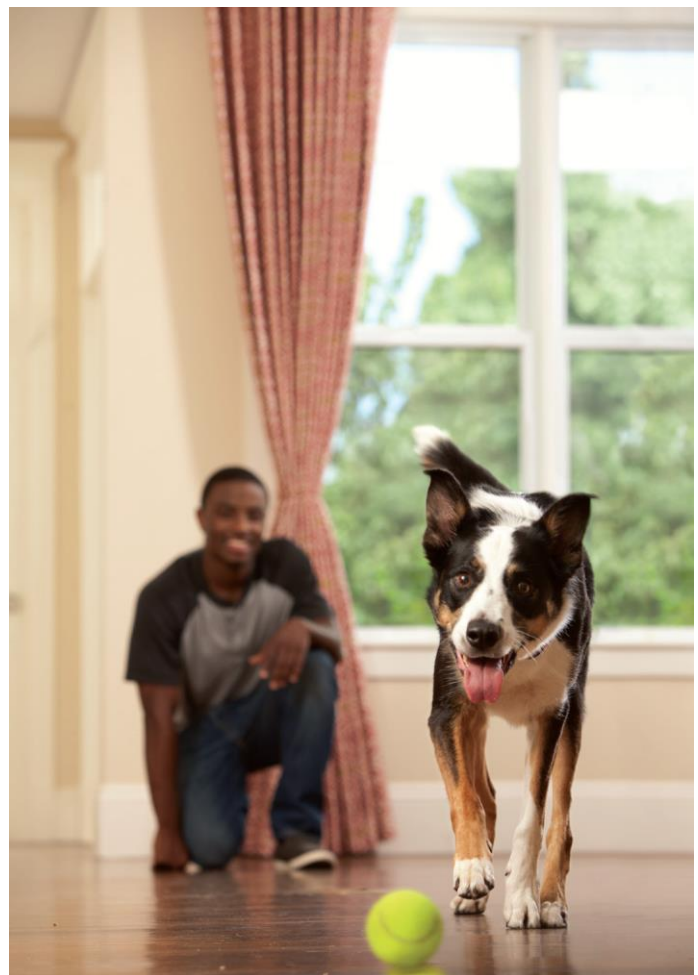
The 4 D's; Finding success with Proofing

What is Proofing?

Remember when you first learned how to do basic math? You probably learned in a quiet place like school or home. I bet you even had plenty of opportunity to practice in a structured way. Now, imagine that someone took you to a theme park- imagine the smells, sounds and excitement. I wonder how well you would be able to put that basic math to use. What if during your theme park visit, right after learning how to do math, someone asked you what was the sum of 1,257 and 2,456? You might get it eventually, but it may take a few tries, and it would certainly be frustrating. That is similar to what it is like to take your dog to a new place and ask for something seemingly simple with out going through the proofing process first. Proofing is the final step in your dog learning new behaviors and it is the cornerstone of Intermediate.

In Intermediate, we build on the foundation of Puppy and Beginner class by proofing behaviors. To understand why proofing is important we must first understand how dogs think. Dogs are not able to generalize well, meaning just because the dog can Down on cue in the kitchen does not mean he will be able to do the same thing at the park, unless we proof it.

Proofing is the process of making things more challenging so that ultimately the behavior we are asking for can become stronger and more reliable. Proofing involves practicing behaviors in a variety of situations while a variety of distractions are present, and in some cases while asking behaviors to be held for a long period of time. For example, you and Fido have practiced Down many times at home on the carpet in the living room, but when you went to the park and asked him to lay down in the grass while you waited for your friends; well, he acted like he had never done it before. That's how proofing works! By practicing in many different scenarios, we can help them learn that Down means Down regardless of the situation. To make this easier we have broken proofing into to 4 concepts that we call the 4 D's.



The 4 D's

Distance: Distance equals Space. This can be how far you can move away from your dog after asking for a behavior like Stay or Wait so you can safely bring groceries inside. This can also be how far away you can be from your dog when asking for a behavior, such as asking them to go to Place so your company can come in the door, uninterrupted.

Duration: Duration equals Time. This can be the amount of time your dog can maintain a behavior. Can they hold a Sit/Stay for thirty seconds while we attached their leash? Maybe a Settle while we meet a friend for coffee?

Diversity: Diversity equals New. Is your dog able to do the behaviors on a new surface like tile, grass or concrete? Is your dog able to practice behaviors in new places like the Vet's office, the groomer or the park? Have you tried asking for a behavior in a new way? Have you asked for Down while you're in a seated position? Have you asked for Down while they're standing, rather than asking for Sit first? This is important because the more ways you practice and in the more places you practice the more reliable the behavior becomes.

Distraction: Distractions equal anything the dog can hear, see, feel, smell or taste. Distractions can come from anything and everything all at once. Anything that pulls your dogs attention away from you is a distraction. Can you think of some things that your dog may find distracting?

By building Duration, increasing Distractions, incorporating Distance and Diversifying where and how we are delivering information, we are giving our dogs the right tools they will need to be successful in the real world.

The Learning Zone

It's important to remember that just like people dogs have an optimal learning zone, a place where success is evident, and your dog is doing a great job with known behaviors. Right now, that learning zone may be small, might even look like just the kitchen or living room at home or even in the training ring and that's okay, together we can expand that zone and that makes life more enjoyable for all.

When beginning the process of proofing, you'll want to start slowly. The goal is to expand the learning zone and to never make it so hard that they fail. When practicing, you will want to look for practical ways to expand the learning zone by incorporating the 4 D's. Do not expect that right after learning a new and complex behavior like Heel or Stay that you will be able to go out to the farmers market and be successful. We need to build on it slowly. Practice the behavior in the zone, then incorporate a low-intensity distraction (for example: bending over to tie your shoe or opening and closing the back door). Maybe try practicing the behavior in the back yard where there are some distractions and diversity. Ask for a bit more by moving into the driveway or front lawn. Then expand to around the block and to the park. The Behavior Bingo cards, in Intermediate, offers many amazing ideas to help expand you and your dog's learning zone. Remember that very often when we start to expand the zone it becomes more and more difficult. We must remember that we are ALWAYS in competition with our environment and that means we better play to win and have plenty of high value reward that can help with engagement in new and challenging places.

Be patient as you practice proofing and remember to meet your dog where they are successful. Stay Calm, Stay Engaged and Have fun!

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