



## Fostering Engagement to Prevent Unresponsiveness in Your Dog

Training your dog isn't always easy. When your dog gets distracted and disengaged and won't work with you, it can be very frustrating. It is tempting to blame the dog- to label them as "bored" or "not into it" or just "stubborn". The good news is regardless of your dog's personality type, they can become more responsive, enthusiastic, and fun to train. You need to teach your dog that you are more exciting and valuable than anything else going on in the environment. This is what trainers mean when they talk about a dog being engaged.

To grow your relationship with your dog, it will help if you understand the reasons your dog might not be responding. These reasons may include:

- Lack of rewards from you. If you walk into PetSmart and your dog gets to meet another dog, receive petting from another human and eat tasty treats off the floor, they are getting rewarded by the environment, not by you.
- You are asking too much. It's easy to believe that because your dog can perform a cue at home, that they should be able to do it in the store. This is simply not the case.
- You are inconsistent or unreliable from your dog's point of view. If you have ever asked for a cue multiple times or failed to deliver a reward when you Marked a behavior, your dog may feel frustrated or confused.
- Your dog is uncomfortable, anxious or in pain. No one is at their best when they are hurting. Sometimes the signs your dog is not feeling 100% are tough to see. Remember that any change in the environment can be stress inducing for some dogs. Stress and anxiety will reduce responsiveness from your dog.

In Puppy/Beginner class, the very first cue we teach is Automatic Focus. Having your dog check in with you is invaluable for training. Unfortunately, dogs check in a great deal without get reinforced for it. So next time your dog looks at you at home, praise them, pet them, and just acknowledge them so that they will continue to find value in the interaction with you and seek it out more! The following are some activities to practice with your dog to enhance engagement:

1. Teach Automatic Focus. Start with your dog on a leash in a quiet environment and wait for the moment they look at you. Mark and Reward immediately with your dog's preferred treat. After repeating this several times, hold the treat off to the side of you. Most dogs will look at the treat. Keep the treat out of reach and wait. Your dog will briefly look at you at some point. When they do, immediately Mark and Reward. This way your dog learns that looking at you gets them great things. Be sure to teach this in a non-distracting area and then, once successful, try it in more stimulating places.
2. Try the Cookie on the Floor method. With your dog on a leash, place a treat on the floor just out of reach. Most dogs will lunge and pull to get to the treat. Again, wait them out. Eventually your dog will turn and look at you. Mark and either give them a better treat from your hand or pick



up the treat from the floor and give it to them. Your dog will learn all great things come from you!

3. Use the Slow Treat Method. Take a treat and hold it in your hand at shoulder level. Move the treat toward your dog slightly. If your dog keeps four feet on the floor, Mark and quickly deliver the treat. Repeat, gradually moving the treat closer and closer before delivering the treat. If your dog jumps for the treat, repeat at the distance where they were successful. The idea is NOT to frustrate your dog, but to start to teach them a little impulse control and patience. If your dog fails twice in a row, you are making the exercise too difficult and you will need to take smaller steps.
4. Add movement. When you are out in a more distracting environment, like the front yard or the park, watch for your dog to look at you. When they do, Mark and either take a step away from your dog or move the treat so that they follow you to get it. Deliver the treat close to your body as your dog moves to you. This adds excitement to the activity for your dog and keeps them focused on you for a longer time.
5. Always stop training on a successful note and before your dog tires of the activity. This will help your dog be motivated to join in fun with you again, whenever you offer it. Your dog should enjoy training and look forward to spending time with you.

Your goal when working on focus activities is for your dog to recognize you as more interesting, engaging and fun than anything else going on in the environment. You may also consider teaching tricks, assisting your dog with puzzle toys or even playing your dog's favorite game to generate even more engagement. We get to share only a short time with our dogs. Take the time out of your day to play with your dog. Give them that extra treat and give them some love when they seek you out. You will never regret spending more time enjoying life with your dog.