

Down Dog Digest

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"He does it at home" Practice Produces Progress

"Sit" I asked. Slowly Gus lowered his bottom to the floor. I lowered my own posterior onto my study chair – and without him barking. Success.

Readers of my second book, "Chaos to Calmish: Diary of a Pesky Puppy's First Year", will know that I set up a problem for myself when Gus was a puppy. My study had just a concrete floor when he was a puppy, and the air squish noise my study chair made when I sat on it, then the noise of the wheels as I moved, echoed round the room. Genetically a noise sensitive dog, it startled Gus, who barked at it a few times - and so a habit was formed.

I've finally decided to address the problem, so when I go into my study I now ask him to sit by the desk while I sit down, which prevents the barking. It's still a work in progress. He's just turned eight and it's such an ingrained habit by now I will either always have to manage it this way, or put up with the barking.

I know I should have done something about it much, much sooner, but we are where we are.

We need to practice more. A lot more.

The phrase 'practice makes perfect' irritates me. Perfection is an ideal and almost never attainable in any field, but especially dog behaviour. Most of the time, as in this case, the aim is to change a behaviour to something different to manage a problem. Most dog behaviours result from natural urges or responses, which you can change but never eliminate. I'm unlikely ever to reach perfection with Gus reacting to my chair, but I can manage it by the simple method of asking him to sit by the desk.



Instead of this phrase we've come up with 'Practice Produces Progress' as our new Down Dog mantra.

Our signature Perfect Pet course teaches you a range of games to help you build a great relationship with your dog, to teach them to walk nicely on lead, to train them to come back when called, to teach them good manners with visitors and when meeting and greeting people and other dogs, and to enjoy being touched and handled for any husbandry, grooming or veterinary treatment they might need.

We encourage and support people to practice all this training in lots of different places through our follow-on Putting it into Practice (PiP)

Practice Produces Progress

course, but then it's up to our clients to continue the training.

Because teaching your dog a cue is only the beginning. It's easy to teach dogs to sit, or to lie down, or wait or stay, but real nitty gritty training is all about what happens after you've taught the basic cues.

Ask yourself: will my dog perform the behaviour anywhere and anytime I ask? Be honest!

Will your dog only do what you ask in your own home? Or when you're holding a treat in your hand? Perhaps they come when called – but only if nothing else takes their fancy. Perhaps they'll lie down – but only until they decide to get up again. Or perhaps they'll sit nicely, except if a visitor comes, when they'll jump all over them.

There are three key elements that will help you create brilliant, rock-solid behaviours.

We call them the "Three D's": duration, distance and distraction. Understanding and training for these will give you the confidence that your dog will perform any behaviour with total understanding, anywhere and anytime you ask.

What are these three D's?

1. **Duration;** the length of time your dog is expected to maintain the response.
2. **Distance;** the distance your dog is away from you, or the reward or distraction.
3. **Distraction;** things that are distracting for your dog, such as other dogs, balls, birds, scents, food, or people.

Let's look at these in the next section.

The Three Ds How to build training reliability

Duration

The first stage is to build duration into any behaviour while staying close by your dog.

When you start, begin asking for a very short duration, such as one second. Gradually build the time your dog stays in position until you reach one minute.

Once your dog is successfully maintaining the behaviour for a reasonable amount of time with you close by, you can add distance.

Distance

Adding distance also adds in distraction – more later!

When you start adding in distance, at the same time you need to decrease duration –

training both together is too hard.

Start by taking one step away. Then, with you staying at that one step distance, gradually grow the duration again.

Next, take two steps away. Repeat, varying how far away you move and how long you ask your dog to hold the behaviour.

Once your dog can respond well at a decent distance, you can start to add more or different distractions.

Distraction

This is the big one. Life is full of the most tempting distractions for your dog (and for you) and training your dog to ignore all distractions is a life-long commitment.

That's why sometimes the easiest option is management – putting your dog on a lead when other dogs are around, avoiding busy dog parks



How to build training reliability

and shutting your dog away somewhere quiet if you're having a party.

The distractions you should train for are the general, everyday distractions, such as visitors coming, passing people and dogs in the street, deliveries, traffic, discarded food, children playing and other dogs playing.

It takes time and practice. And it's not just for sit, down and wait or stay, it's vital for improving recall, keeping your dog walking calmly at your side at all times, or any other behaviour – it's all about practice - which produces progress.



How to do it

The first distraction you could add might be something as simple as you sitting on a chair, or on the floor, and asking for a sit or down. Or ask for the behaviour in a different room in the house, or in the garden.

The behaviour might be easy in your hallway with no other distractions, but moving it to the living room with children running around and shouting might be really hard for your dog to do and you risk setting them up to fail.

Moving to the garden where there might be squirrels and birds is the next big step. Then you

can start to ask for the behaviour on walks, when nothing else is around, then with people or dogs in the distance, then with them closer and so on.

Which behaviours you want to focus on most depends on what you want from your dog. If you've got a hungry Labrador you might want to focus on your "leave it" cue and on recall, for example. If you've got a barky Schnauzer you might want to work on "quiet", or if you've got a ball-obsessed collie you might prefer to work on "watch me", recall or tug games.

When working on things that are very distracting for your dog, make sure you start at a good distance from the distraction and slowly work closer. Gradually, you can add more, and harder, distractions, and finally, one day, you'll take the behaviour successfully to a busy beach or park, but only when you feel your dog is ready.

Always set your dog up for success.

How will I know when to progress?

Work on one thing at a time. You're either going to be working on the challenge of distance, or the challenge of duration, or the challenge of distraction. Trying to combine them all at once is like trying to read War and Peace when you've only just managed Janet and John.

A good rule of thumb is to practice each behaviour to proficiency in at least five different places and situations.

The best way to gauge if your dog is ready to move on is when they're doing what you ask in that situation or environment with confidence – they look happy and do what you ask quickly and easily nearly every time (the 95% rule).

Practice produces progress.

Keeping the 3Ds in mind is going to help you get great behaviours and help you train your dog to respond to you whenever and wherever you want - the Holy Grail of training!

Carol's Challenge

Each month I'm going to set you a challenge.

This month your challenge, should you wish to accept it, is: Create your Master Distraction List.

Write a list of all the things that are most distracting for your dog (or for each dog if you have more than one canine). Then note the ones you need to work on - those where you want your dog's response to be better.

Knowing your dog's main distractions is especially important when training an excellent recall.

Here are some common distractions to get you thinking!

- Children playing nearby, screaming, yelling,
- Animals - sheep, cows, horses, pigs, cats, rabbits (tame or wild)
- Birds - flying, on the ground, squawking,
- Other dogs - on lead, running off lead, playing with balls, barking,
- Scents and smells (your dog doesn't hear you when they are focused on a scent)
- Cars, lorries, cyclists, motorbikes, rollerbladers
- Discarded food, bins,
- Family members walking away,

- A new place or environment,
- Water - hoses, ponds, rivers, or sea
- Delivery men arriving, bin lorries,
- Noisy chairs when you sit on them, planes, (yes, that's Gus)...

Once you've written down everything you can think of, give each one a score between 1 and 10, 1 for things that aren't much of a distraction and 10 for those things where your dog completely ignores anything and everything you do to attract their attention.

Then it's time to plan some training! Just five minutes a day will make a difference.

But it's hard to train regularly. That's why we've set up our Down Dog Drills group to provide support.

Keeping up regular long term training is hard, and having a group at your back will help you keep going even when things are tough and life seems overwhelming. You can join the online sessions live or recorded (or both if you're really keen!)

Go to the website (downdog.co.uk/drills) to find out more. At only £15 a month for at least 2 sessions each week, it's a snip - and you'll end up with a brilliantly obedient pet while having fun into the bargain.



We hope you've enjoyed this Down Dog Digest.

Please feel free to share it with any friends, neighbours or family members you think might find it interesting.

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Go to the website, www.downdog.co.uk, to find out more.