



Target Training



Get your dog in the position YOU want!

© Stacy Braslau-Schneck, CPDT

Training a dog to find a target is one of my favorite exercises!

Targeting - What is it?

A "target" is anything that the dog must focus on and perform some action towards. I usually introduce the idea of a target when I reward a dog for touching my palm, but it has really started earlier than that. Attention is a form of targeting, where the dog is focusing her gaze on your face (or hands). "Come" is a form of targeting in which the dog must find the area right in front of you. In agility, dogs must step within a certain safety area called a contact zone on many obstacles, to prove that they are dismounting correctly and not just flying off the top of a high dog-walk or A-frame.

The dog can show her focus on the target in many ways. The most common are a nose-touch or a paw-touch. Actors - both human and animal - have "marks" on the stage where they must stand. Placing feet on a mark is a form of targeting. At the dolphin lab where I used to train, the dolphins could touch a target with their rostrum [nose], front flipper, or tail fins. Or they could "target" an object by spitting water at it, opening their mouths around it, jumping over it, or swimming under it belly-up.

What's it used for?

There are many specialized uses for targeting. In competition obedience, a dog is trained to move away from the handler on a "go out" in targeting. They're also asked to retrieve certain objects. As mentioned above, agility competitors must touch a contact target. Actors must find their marks.

What about pet dogs? Two of the best uses for targeting is teaching a dog to walk by your side, and to go to her bed on command. It's possible to teach a dog to walk at your side just by rewarding her for doing so (and of course removing the reward for walking anywhere else), but it may be that "at your side" is too vague for many dogs. If they have something

to focus on, they can immediately know where they're supposed to be. So, if you teach your dog to follow your hand (or a stick in your hand, for a shorter dog) with her nose, she will be perfectly placed and ready to reap your rewards.

There are many times when you might want to send your dog away from you. Maybe you have guests coming over and want to greet them at the door without your dog's help. Maybe the kids are having a messy birthday party, or everyone's sitting on the ground to enjoy a barbeque. Wouldn't it be nice to cue your dog to "go to bed" and have her find her special pillow or crate to curl up for a while? Finding and moving to a special place are forms of targeting. Sometimes you just want to get your dog to move to a particular place - up on the couch next to you, on to the floor, maybe just scooting over a few inches to make room for someone else. Targeting will help.

Targeting is the first step of retrieving, as well. Your dog can't bring something to you if she can't find it first - and it doesn't matter if it's a ball, Frisbee, or stick, or your car keys, TV remote, or missing cordless phone.

You can use targeting to start a lot of "tricks", too. You can teach a dog to spin a circle or push doors closed by following a target with a nose, and you can teach a paw wave or pushing a lever with a paw-touch on a target. You can easily groom a dog who is keeping her nose or feet on a target. "Hearing ear" dogs for the deaf often touch their partners with a paw to alert them to phones, doorbells, or fire alarms. You can teach your dog to run to a door or to a certain part of the yard at the sound of your own smoke alarm.

A lot of dogs have a good time just finding and touching the target when it's presented as a challenging game. One dog I know loves to run over to his target, touch it emphatically, then run back at the sound of the clicker to get his treat or praise. Many other dogs love to jump up to touch a high target, just like a killer whale in an aquarium show, or compete in a speed game to see how quickly they can get their nose or paw to the target you surprise them with!

How do you train it?

The beginning of target training takes advantage of the dog's natural curiosity. Most dogs will sniff or even touch your palm if you hold it out to them - especially if you've just been handling food treats. Simply click and reward your dog for each touch. It helps if you hold it close to their nose, maybe just below their nose level. If you want to eventually transfer the nose-touch to some inanimate object - like a target stick, sticky note (such as a Post-It®), or margarine lid, simply put some food smell on that, too, and hold it cupped in your hand when you start.

To train the paw touch, move your hand around in short, jerky movements low to the ground near the dog's paws, or hold a treat under your hand. Most dogs will paw at this. Again, click and reward for each touch.

Repeat this a few times. See if your dog gets more confident in her touches. I've found that many dogs, even those with some experience with "making you click", act as if they don't believe that simply touching your hand will work. Make sure you reward this easy first step quite a few times before making it any harder.

Once you have the initial touching fairly confident, hold the target out a little bit further - a few inches away, or just enough for the dog to really stretch out her neck (or leg) to touch it. Click and reward those touches, repeating a few times.

Now start varying the position of the target relative to the dog, and relative to you, and you relative to the dog. Hold it out slightly to one side, then the other; hold it an inch or two above or below the original level. Hold the target out while you stand, sit, or kneel; while you face the dog or have the dog at your side. Make it clear that it's touching the target that is causing the click and reward, not any of the other factors your dog is seeing.

Are you willing to bet that your dog will touch the target at any one time? Then add a cue, like "Touch!", "Target!", or "Paw it!", or a hand signal like touching the target yourself with two fingers of the other hand. Add the cue just before you think the dog will do it, to form the association between the cue and the action.

Stationary Targets vs. Moving Targets

There are two different types of targets: stationary and moving ones. Stationary targets stay where they are, and the dog must move to reach them and then can stay put there. Moving targets move around, and the dog must follow them. The actor's mark, the agility contact zone, and the dog's bed are all stationary targets that the dog must move to in order to touch. Your hand, your front, your eyes, and target sticks are all moving targets. The dog must move to follow your hand or target stick as you walk or lead her around. The dog must come towards you to target your front on a "come" command, and move to your line-of-sight to pay attention to you.

Stationary and moving targets can be initially trained the same way, but the more advanced steps differ slightly. To train a stationary target, you want to start each repetition by moving the dog further away from the target (or the target further away from the dog) and get her used to taking first one, then two, then several steps towards it to make contact and get clicked and rewarded. You can set up a few trials where the treat is waiting at the

target when the dog gets there, too.

To train a moving target, start moving the target slowly as the dog approaches it so that she has to follow it. Start with having her follow it for a second, then for two, then several, before she gets her click and treat.

For both types of targets, gradually build up the distance or difficulty, occasionally throwing in an easier (shorter) practice, and being sure to "jackpot" especially good successes.

Fading the Target

For some actions, you won't ever need to take away the target. Your front and eyes will always be there for your dog to find on a "come" or "pay attention". Your dog's bed or crate will always be there for her to trot over to when you ask her to go there.

For other actions, you'll want to fade away the target. You probably don't want to walk with your hand or target stick in front of your dog's nose. If you're teaching a paw wave or head shake you'll want the dog to move her body without having to follow your target. So you'll need to fade it away.

You can make it less relevant by making it smaller (cutting down the margarine lid, shortening the target stick, or fading your palm to a few fingers) or by holding it further away, while still rewarding the dog for following through with the actions you want. In fact, the less relevant you make the target, the more you want to reward the action. You're shifting the importance from following the target with nose or paw to completing the action in the absence of the target.

Return to [Training Tips](#).

Last Updated August 26, 1999 by Stacy Braslau-Schneck. All material copyright Stacy Braslau-Schneck. Reprints for non-commercial use, and with the author's permission only.

[[Home](#)] [[Classes](#)] [[Training Tips](#)] [[Resources](#)] [[Events](#)]

Copyright 2002 Stacy's Wag'N'Train