



# Getting Your Dog's Attention

Getting a dog's attention, particularly when they are young, recently adopted, or new to training, is an important first step to teaching any behavior. If your dog isn't looking at you, they probably aren't listening to your commands either.

So the question is: How do you get your dog to look at you when the world is full of fun distractions? Here are a few fun games and training exercises to help teach your dog to direct their focus to you!

## The Nothing Game

Stand with the dog and simply do nothing... until the dog pays attention to you! Then you come alive and respond to the dog. In this game, the dog is rewarded for making a choice to be attentive, rather than you trying to force the dog to pay attention to you. Here is how it works:

1. Stand with the dog, holding the leash.
2. Without directly staring at the dog, be vigilant about observing what the dog is doing.
3. Whenever the dog happens to glance in your direction, **MARK** and deliver a **TREAT**.
4. Repeat several times until the dog is consistently orienting toward you.
5. Begin **MARKING** and **TREATING** for eye contact lasting 1-2 seconds or longer.
6. If the dog is staring at you, good job! Take one or two small steps, continuing to ignore the dog. **MARK** and **TREAT** if the dog looks up at you or maintains eye contact.
7. Step to either side, continuing to **MARK** and **TREAT** for maintaining eye contact, or looking up at you.

*Tip:* Timing is very important, as well as enthusiasm while you are treating. You are rewarding the dog for being attentive to you, by likewise devoting attention to the dog.

## Find It

This is one of the easiest games to play with your dog, and can be a very useful first step for addressing a number of behavior issues. A dog who is fluent in this game will begin searching for treats even in highly distracting situations. We use this game to direct their attention to the ground instead of the distraction. Here is how it works:

1. Say "find it" once, in a gentle upbeat voice.
2. Drop 2-3 **TREATS** within the dog's reach (i.e. within the length of the leash).
3. Repeat.

*Tip:* Keep this game moving quickly — as soon as the dog finishes eating and starts to look back at you, say "find it" and drop treats again. You will keep the dog more interested and engaged if the game is fun and quick, and they are getting lots of treats!



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## Touch

Touch is a fun game for the dogs once they understand the concept of targeting your hand. Targeting means the dog looks for your hand and enthusiastically touches the palm of your hand with their nose. Touch is a useful exercise for multiple reasons — it can be used to build a shy dog's confidence by rewarding the shy dog for approaching a new person's outstretched hand; it can be used to teach a mouthy puppy to interact with people's hands in a fun way that requires a closed mouth; and it can be used to redirect a dog's attention away from a bird, squirrel, or other dog in order to prevent the dog from overreacting to the stimulus. Here is how it works:

1. Bury a treat between your fingers and hold out your palm towards the dog. Do not say "touch" yet — we will add the verbal cue later.
2. As soon as their nose touches your palm, **MARK** and let them have a reward **TREAT**. Remember to feed them a treat from your other hand, instead of the treat between your fingers.
3. After a few successful repetitions, simply hold out your palm with no treat, and wait for the dog to touch the palm of your hand with their nose. **MARK** and **TREAT** every time the dog does this!

When the dog is offering the behavior consistently every time you hold out your palm, start saying the word "touch" just before you hold your palm out toward the dog.

## Watch Me

This is the most powerful focus game because it can be used to direct your dog's attention straight to you. Here is how it works:

1. Put a treat on their nose and slowly raise it up and hold it next to your eyes.
2. When their eyes move from the treat, and look directly into your eyes instead, **MARK** and **TREAT**.
3. After a few successful repetitions repeat the same motion of moving your hand from their nose to your eyes without a treat in your hand. When they look at your eyes, **MARK** and **TREAT**.

## The Engage-Disengage Game

This is a training game for dogs who are fearful, anxious, or frustrated around specific triggers (like people, other dogs, person, or sounds). The goal is to first decrease the dog's negative feelings and then to teach the dog a new safe and appropriate behavior to do instead. Here is how it works:

1. Start at a safe distance away from the **TRIGGER**, where your dog is not reacting. Be quiet and still so your dog notices the trigger on their own.
2. At the precise moment your dog looks at the trigger, **MARK** and **TREAT**.
3. If your dog reacts or ignores the treat, move further away from the trigger and reset.



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Once your dog has worked on these steps (after three to five repetitions), you can move on to the more difficult version, focusing on teaching your dog to disengage with triggering stimuli. A successful repetition is when your dog immediately turns back to you, anticipating the treat. Here is how it works:

1. Let your dog notice the **TRIGGER** again, but wait a few seconds to see if they will **LOOK** at you on their own.
2. At the precise moment your dog disengages by looking away from the trigger, **MARK** and **TREAT**.
3. If your dog is fixating on the trigger, and takes more than 5 seconds to look at you, return to practicing the earlier steps.

Do three to five repetitions before moving a few steps closer to the trigger. A successful repetition is when your dog disengages with the trigger on their own.