

Teaching Your Dog to “Watch Me”

Definition:

"Watch me, look at my face, and focus on me."

Practical uses:

“Watch Me” is a useful behavior when you want to get your dog’s focus on you instead of something like another dog, a squirrel, or other temptations.

How to teach:

Do something to get your dog’s attention—move quickly or make a noise with your mouth—when the dog looks at your face, click and treat (C/T). Use different actions/sounds to get the dog to look at you and don’t always reward in the same body position (for example, make sure the dog isn’t always sitting when you C/T).

Get in the habit, even when not training, to C/T whenever your dog looks at you. This rewards “checking in” and encourages your dog to look to you for direction and guidance.

Adding the cue:

When the dog is offering the behavior (looking at your face without your having to do something to get her attention), begin saying the cue word (“ watch me” or “look”) as she looks at you, so that the dog associates the behavior with the word.

In your next training session, start by saying the cue word before the dog looks at you. After a few repetitions, wait for the dog to look away, and then use your cue word. If she looks at you, you know she understands the cue.

Moving On:

- Gradually increase the length of time your dog looks at you before you click. Work up to about 30 seconds of attention. Increase the time gradually, just a couple seconds at a time, over multiple sessions.
- If the dog looks away before you C/T, ask for the “watch me” again, but make it shorter so the dog succeeds. Make sure the dog has at least five successes before you try a longer duration again.
- Variable Schedule of Reinforcement – you have been using a “continuous schedule of reinforcement” which means the dog gets a treat every time he performs the behavior. Now you’re ready to move to a variable schedule of reinforcement, meaning he only gets a treat sometimes. Only C/T every third, sixth, second, fourth, or tenth time he performs the behavior.
- Once your dog is performing the behavior reliably on cue (i.e., he will do the behavior when you give the verbal cue at least 90% of the time) on a variable schedule of reinforcement, you don’t really need the clicker any more for this behavior. You should still reward your dog often and variably with praise or a food treat, but you don’t need the clicker any more for this behavior!

Tips:

- Remember that direct eye contact can be threatening to a dog. Looking directly into your dog's eyes may cause her to look away as a gesture of appeasement to you. Smile at your dog; if necessary, look at the top of her head or her ear rather than directly into her eyes.
- Make sure you are standing erect – not bending at the waist – so that you are not “looming” over the dog. If you are working with a small dog, consider getting on your knees (still keeping your upper body erect) or putting the dog on a bench or table.