SKILLS

ATTENTION

Attention is one of the most important skills you can build with your dog. It teaches your dog to check in and connect with you instead of making all their own decisions. When you stop, change direction, or need your dog's focus, you want them to look to you for information: What are we doing next? Where are we going? What do you need from me? There are a few ways to teach this skill:

NAME/ATTENTION

Say your dog's name. As soon as they make eye contact with you, mark it with "Yes!" and reward. With practice, your dog will learn that hearing their name means, Pay attention and check in with my person.

CHECK IN

Use a treat to lure your dog's attention toward your face while saying "Look at me" or "Check in." As soon as your dog makes eye contact, mark it with "Yes!" and reward. Over time, use less of the lure so your dog learns to respond to the verbal command.

NAME + CHECK IN

You can also combine the two skills. Say your dog's name followed by the command:
"Sophie, check in."
As soon as Sophie makes eye contact, "Yes!" and reward.

Remember: Attention builds connection. The more your dog learns to check in with you, the easier it becomes for you to communicate, give direction, and work together as a team.

WALK

Walking with your dog should be a pleasant experience for both of you. A good walk takes some planning, practice, and the right equipment. Make sure you are using an appropriate collar or harness and lead to keep you and your dog safe. Before you step into the walk, give your dog a moment to settle and connect with you. When you are both ready, use "Let's Go" to begin.

TUNE-UP

A Tune-Up is a great way to get your dog focused on you before or during a walk. For a couple of minutes, practice changing directions—turn right, turn left, and make a full turn-around. Your dog should pay attention, follow your direction, and stay with you in the heel position. Keep it fun and moving!

HEEL

Your dog walks beside you and stays there until released. Heel is especially important in busy public places where there may be people, dogs, traffic, or other distractions. It keeps your dog close, focused, and connected to you.

LOOSE LEAD WALK

Your dog can walk beside you, slightly in front, or slightly behind you, but the lead stays loose. Your dog should continue to pay attention to where you are going and stay connected to you. This is great for everyday walks in quieter, low-traffic areas.

ROAMING/NOSE WALK

A Nose Walk gives your dog more freedom to explore, sniff, and enjoy their surroundings. In a large, safe area, use a long lead (10–20 feet) to give your dog room to roam while you walk. Even with more freedom, your dog should regularly check in with you and respond when you give a verbal command or when they reach the end of the lead.

Remember: More freedom comes once you have a great relationship and clear communication. Starting on very short lead until they are very connected and paying attention. Longer lead as long as they are not pulling. If they pull, correct, if they continue to pull, they loose that freedom.

SKILLS

WAIT

Teaching your dog to wait is important for both safety and good manners. Wait means your dog pauses and does not move forward or access something until you give permission. Dogs can learn to wait before entering or leaving a space, eating their food, taking a treat, getting out of the car, or doing something else they are excited about. Waiting teaches patience and self-control. It also teaches your dog to look to you for direction instead of rushing ahead and making the decision on their own.

FOOD

You can begin teaching this skill when your dog is young by practicing at mealtime.

- Prepare your dog's food and keep it out of reach.
- Ask your dog to Sit.
- Place the bowl on the floor, but do not allow your dog to access it yet.
- If your dog gets up or pushes toward the food, calmly block access and ask them to Sit again.
- When your dog is sitting calmly and waiting, mark the behavior with "Yes!" and give your release word or motion to let them eat.
- Practice this at each meal until waiting becomes a normal part of the routine.

BARRIER TO ENTRY/EXIT

Another important safety skill is teaching your dog to wait at a barrier, such as a doorway, gate, or other entrance or exit. Your dog learns that an open door does not automatically mean GO!

- Put your dog on a lead and have some treats ready.
- Walk to the doorway, stop, and ask your dog to Sit.
- Give your Wait hand signal and begin to open the door.
- If your dog stands up or moves toward the doorway, say "Nope," close or block the door, and calmly return them to the starting position.
- Try again. Work a little at a time until you can open the door and your dog continues to wait.
- Step through the doorway while your dog remains in place.
- When you are ready, invite your dog to come through. You can use "Heel" to bring them to your side.
- Once your dog can do this consistently on lead, you can practice off lead in a secure, safe area.

As your dog improves, practice standing in an open doorway for a short time while they continue to wait. Only practice with an open exterior door when the area is secure and it is safe to do so.

Remember: An open door, a bowl of food, or something exciting is not permission to move forward. Your dog learns to pause, check in, and wait for direction from you.

PLACE

Teaching your dog Place or Mat gives them a specific spot to go to and settle. This is a skill you will use throughout your dog training. Place is especially helpful when your dog needs to stay out of the way, calm down, or relax while still paying attention to you. Their place might be a raised dog bed, mat, or another clearly defined space.

- Start with your dog near the place or mat and have a treat ready.
- Use the treat to lure your dog onto the place.
- As soon as all four paws are on the place, mark it with “Yes!”
- Pull your hand back and away from the place so your dog moves to get the reward.
- Reset and repeat.

At first, you are simply teaching your dog, This is where I want you to go. Once your dog understands the skill, you can begin working on staying and settling there for longer periods of time.

SIT

Sit is one of the basic positions you will use throughout your dog training.

- Start with a treat at your dog’s nose.
- Slowly move the treat straight up and slightly back over your dog’s head.
- As your dog follows the treat with their nose, their bottom should naturally move toward the ground.
- As soon as their bottom touches the ground, mark it with “Yes!”
- Pull your hand back so your dog stands and moves to get the reward.
- Reset and repeat.

Keep your movements slow and clear. Give your dog time to figure out what you are asking instead of rushing the process.

DOWN

Down teaches your dog to lie calmly on the ground. This position is useful for building self-control, settling, and eventually staying in one place for longer periods of time.

- Begin with your dog in a Sit.
- Hold a treat at your dog’s nose and slowly move it straight down toward their front paws.
- Wait for your dog to lower their head and body. Do not pull the treat toward you too quickly.
- Once their front legs begin moving toward the ground, slowly drag the treat along the floor toward you.
- Move very slowly and allow your dog to follow the treat until their belly and back legs are on the ground.
- As soon as your dog is completely down, mark it with “Yes!”
- Pull your hand back so your dog stands and moves to get the reward.
- Reset and repeat.

BUILDING DURATION

At first, “Yes!” tells your dog they did the correct behavior and releases them to come get their reward. After plenty of successful repetitions—often 50–100—you can begin using “Good” as your marker when you want your dog to remain in position. Instead of pulling your hand away, reward your dog while they are still on the Place, in a Sit, or in a Down. This is when you can begin adding Stay and working on Duration, one of the 3 D’s: Duration, Distance, and Distraction.
Build slowly. First ask your dog to stay a little longer. Then begin adding a little distance. Finally, practice around different distractions. Do not make all three harder at the same time.

Remember: Training is about clearly showing your dog what you want and giving them plenty of opportunities to get it right. Slow, consistent practice builds understanding and confidence.

RECALL

One of the most important skills for keeping your dog safe is a strong Recall. Recall simply means your dog comes to you when called. Dogs are naturally curious. They can become focused on something they see, hear, or smell and completely forget that you are there! A strong recall teaches your dog that when you call, they should stop what they are doing, check in, and come back to you. NEVER trust your dog off lead in an unsecured area until they have developed an excellent, dependable recall. Even a well-trained dog can become distracted. Recall should be fun! You want your dog to learn that coming to you is always worth it.
To practice, you will need a long lead (10–20 feet; Biothane works well) and some extra-yummy, smelly treats that your dog really loves.

FOLLOW ME

This game teaches your dog to pay attention to where you are and follow your movement.

- With your dog on a long lead, allow them to wander a short distance away.
- Say your dog's name and show them you have a treat.
- Encourage them toward you, using the lead gently if needed.
- As soon as they come to you, mark it with "Yes!" and reward.
- Toss another treat nearby and let your dog go after it.
- As they get the treat, quickly move in another direction. Try not to pull on the lead.
- When your dog notices and runs toward you, "Yes!" and reward.
- Repeat by changing directions and making it a game.

The goal is for your dog to begin thinking, Where did my person go? I need to keep up!

COME

Practice this in a safe, quiet area without a lot of people, dogs, or other distractions.

- Put your dog on a long lead and release them for a Roaming/Nose Walk.
- Let them explore, sniff, and move around while you walk.
- Once your dog is interested in something else, clearly call their name and command: "Sophie, Come!"
- When they turn and begin moving toward you, encourage them with praise.
- If needed, use gentle guidance with the lead to help them understand what you want.
- When they reach you, mark it with "Yes!" and reward with praise, affection, and/or a high-value treat.
- Release them to explore again and repeat.

As your dog improves, gradually practice around more distractions and from greater distances.

HIDE & SEEK

Hide & Seek is a fun way to make finding you exciting!

- Have another person safely hold your dog while you move away and hide nearby.
- Once you are ready, call: "Sophie, Come!"
- Have the other person release the dog to find you.
- When your dog finds you, mark it with "Yes!" and celebrate with lots of praise and a reward.
- Reset and play again.

RECALL FROM DISTRACTIONS

Once your dog understands Come, begin practicing when they are interested in something else.
Start with easier distractions and gradually make them more challenging. Call "Sophie, Come!" and reward your dog when they leave the distraction and return to you. Remember, you are asking your dog to leave something interesting and choose you instead. Make coming back to you worth it!

IMPORTANT: Do not repeatedly call "Come, come, come!" while your dog ignores you. Give the command clearly and then help your dog follow through. You want Come to have meaning.

TOUCH

Touch is a great skill to add to your recall. It gives your dog a specific target when they come to you: your hand.

- Hide a treat between your fingers.
- Lower your hand beside you with your palm facing your dog.
- Encourage your dog toward your hand.
- When their nose touches your palm, mark it with “Yes!” and reward.
- Reset and repeat.
- As your dog understands the game, begin saying “Touch” as you present your hand.
- Gradually remove the hidden treat and reward after your dog touches your hand.

Eventually, you can combine the two skills: “Sophie, Come!” → “Touch!” Your dog learns not only to come back to you, but to come all the way to you and make contact.

Remember: Recall is about safety, trust, and connection. Practice often, make it fun, and make coming back to you one of the best choices your dog can make.

BREAK • ALL DONE • FINISHED

Just as your dog needs to know when training starts, they also need to know when training is finished. Choose a release word such as “Break,” “All Done,” or “Finished.” Use the same word consistently so your dog learns what it means.

When you finish a training exercise, clearly say your release word: “Break!” This tells your dog, You’re finished working. You can relax and be a dog! You can toss a couple of treats for your dog to find, give them a toy, let them sniff, or simply allow them some free time. Your release word is especially important when your dog has been asked to hold a position such as Place, Sit, Down, Wait, or Stay. It gives them a clear beginning and a clear ending.

Remember: Clear communication helps your dog succeed. They should know when you are asking them to work, when you want them to settle, and when they are free to Break!

