

How'd You Do That?

by Sherry Antonishen

The Building Bricks of Teaching Tricks

Teaching tricks is such a great way to bond with your dog- but where do you start? I have talked to more than one young man who, after “seeing it on TV”, dreams of having his dog fetch a beer out of the fridge. Yes it can be done. Yes it does take a lot of time. So let's start with something much simpler – because if you teach your dog behaviours that are relatively easy the principles will translate to that very cool beer out of the fridge trick.

Shake a Paw

As with all tricks the best way to teach “shake a paw” is to have treats ready and a ‘cue’ that tells the dog he's going to get a treat for the behaviour (in this case lifting his paw). Most trainers recommend the word “yes” to mark the moment when your dog is doing that which earns a treat. Some dogs are very inclined to give a paw... others require more effort. A long standing way to get our dogs to shake a paw when we ask is to say “shake” and then take hold of the paw and lift it for her. Remembering to say “yes” and give her a treat of course. Eventually the dog lifts her paw on her own and we give her extra love and extra treats for being so brilliant!

There are many other ways to inspire your dog to “shake a

paw”. The ones listed here require the dog to lift her paw on her own and are simplified in their explanations. If one doesn't work try another and remember to be patient—you know what you want but the dog has no idea what you are asking for.

Tapping the dogs toe sometimes inspires a paw to lift. The moment the paw comes off the floor say “yes” and give a treat. Remember if you haven't been using “yes” your dog doesn't actually know that ‘yes means treat’ yet so have the treat immediately follow the yes.

Another fun way to get the dog to raise a paw is by targeting or luring. That is, if you have a dog that is inclined to use his paws while playing you can simply wave your hand or a toy to get the dog to lift the paw. Again, say “yes” and give a treat for each paw lift while the dog is learning.

One can also shape a dog's behaviour into a spontaneous paw lift. This method is used by many animal trainers who must train dogs, cats, chickens etc for performances. For this method have your dog in front of you and simply wait for something to happen. The dog will most likely sit as this is what pays off for her most often. Then watch her front paws.



When one of them lifts, whether its to shift her weight or to stand, say “yes” at the exact moment the paw comes off the ground. This method requires the best timing but will make you a great trainer and make your dog really keen to work. This method requires that the dog ‘figure out’ what she must do in order to get the treat. Dogs trained with shaping often start throwing out more behaviours than those that aren't. Shaping makes wonderful clowns and comedians.

Trick classes are a great way to laugh and have fun with your dog. Approach trick training with an easy-going spirit and always be open to what the dog is naturally inclined to do. Eventually your dog may be getting you a beer while you are busy reading the next issue of The Scoop!

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