

Training Plan: Eye Contact for Leash Reactivity



- End Behavior: Dog looks at handler (without reacting) when he/she sees a "trigger"
- Trigger= what the dog begins as reactive to (e.g. other dogs, cars, bicycles etc.)

Step 1: Decide on a verbal cue that you will use for eye contact. Choose a word that you don't use in many other situations. If you might use the dog's name a lot when you don't require eye contact, then use a special cue like "Look" or "Watch". For this plan we will use "Look."

Step 2: Start inside with no distractions. Give your cue "Look" and get the dog to look at you by making kissy noises, whistles, etc. When the dog gives eye contact, click and reward. Repeat 10 times at random time intervals.

- For this and all following steps, **always get the behavior** (eye contact) **the first time every time** you give the cue. This is why it's important to start inside with no distractions. **Don't repeat the cue;** say it once and if necessary prompt the dog to look at you with kissy noises, whistles etc. If you repeat yourself, the dog may learn to ignore you.

Step 3: Practice "Look" as in step 2 with gradually increasing distractions, inside then outside. When dog is looking at you at least 4 times out of every 5 for the verbal cue, go to step 4.

- Most dogs will learn faster with very high value rewards like cheese, roast beef, chicken etc.

Step 4: Start to use the "Look" cue on walks, while there are no distractions. Always be aware of where your dog is looking. Click and reward the dog if he looks at you even without the "Look" cue. When your dog gives eye contact at least 4 times out of every 5 for the verbal cue, go to step 5.

- On this and all steps, if necessary, go back to using the kissy noises, etc. after the cue to be sure you get the behavior
- If possible, use the walks as training sessions and not as exercise. Exercise the dog in a yard before the walk by playing fetch, tug etc.

Step 5: Start to use the "Look" cue when your dog shows mild interest in low-intensity distractions. This will vary by individual; for some dogs it may be a person walking, for others it may be a bird or a moving car. When your dog gives eye contact at least 4 times out of every 5 for the verbal cue, go to step 6.

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- For this and all subsequent steps, continue to practice the “Look” cue with no distractions to maintain the behavior. You’ll have to do this less as you continue in training, but always practice at least a few times on every walk.

Step 6: Identify your dog’s “triggers”: anything that he will react to with barking, pulling, lunging, etc. For many dogs, this is other dogs, but it might be anything, especially if it is moving. Start to use the “Look” cue when your dog sees a “trigger.” Always stay at a distance that your dog can see the trigger, but will not react to it. If your dog starts to react or is too excited to respond to your “Look” cue, move further away to a distance where you can get the eye contact for your “Look!” cue. Make a note of this distance, and stay far enough away from all triggers.

- Learn your dog’s “threshold”: the point at which he is so focused on the trigger that he will no longer respond to your “Look” cue, even if you use kissy noises or a food lure. You will be able to identify the body language that your dog displays when he is near or at threshold; some examples are freeze, stare, raised hackles. **Always stay at a distance from triggers that your dog will stay under threshold.**
- Make sure your dog sees the trigger before practicing your “Look” cue. Say something like “Who’s that?” if you see a dog and he doesn’t. He will learn with repetition to look around when he hears this orienting cue.
- If you see a trigger approaching and you’re unable to retreat, look for alternate routes (turn a corner, duck up a driveway, etc.) or get behind an obstacle (car, bushes, etc.) to block your dog’s view until the trigger has passed.
- “Turn and Go”: If you get surprised with a trigger, your dog is over threshold and there are no places to get out of sight, move away as quickly as possible, happy talking and luring dog with treats. You will likely need to use some coercion since dog will be freaking out; this is a reason we use front-pull harness for this training, to move the dog with minimal discomfort.
- As your training progresses, your dog may start to give you eye contact when he sees a trigger, before you can give him the “look” cue. When this happens, click and reward/praise heavily. This is the ultimate goal of this training plan!

Step 7: Gradually decrease the distance from the trigger at which you practice the “Look” cue.