AgilityFlix

Good Training Approach

Here is a good training approach that shows you how to set your dog up for success. This is used all the time in training everything from contacts to weaves to jumps.

1) Get the dog comfortable with setup and aides

The best way to build comfort is to just play with toys such that the dog accidentally performs or engages with the setup and aides. For example, get them playing tug and then drag them back and forth under a hoop or bounce their feet on a wobbly board.

2) Break down the behavior into the most simple pieces you can

A great way to build reliable, confident and fast performance is to take a very simple behavior and either assemble it with another simple behavior that has been previously taught or build the complexity of that simple behavior by increasing criteria for performance in very small steps. The best trainers are very good at breaking up behaviors into little pieces.

3) Give the dog a chance to offer something similar to what you want

If your dog has been enjoying the games you've been playing in the process of building their comfort, they will most likely offer to restart the game by trying something that was part of the game. For example, if you've been tugging with their front feet on a wobble board, and you pause in the game, if your dog knows how to try things in order to earn reinforcement, they will most likely try to get on the board in order to make the game start again.

4) Use a marker to tell the dog when they make a good choices

Use a "click" or "yes" or "nice" etc. to tell your dog that they've just earned reinforcement.

5) Use timing and placement of reward to reinforce what you want

Reward a behavior you like in a way that reinforces what you want. For example, reward a sit in a sit by presenting the reward nose up/butt down, reward a look in such a way as they look the same direction when getting their toy or treat.

6) Build enthusiasm for the game of offering the simple piece you are working on

As part of your "comfort" game, pause in the play and give your dog a chance to try something in order to start the game again. If they try something that is even remotely reinforcable, mark it and use placement of reward to encourage them to try something more and more like what you want.

7) Build speed and drive for playing that game

Keep it fun and high energy. Play in short bursts with rapid opportunity to earn rewards. Remember you are only building a piece of the whole behavior - don't fast forward to expecting finished performance criteria which would make it so hard for your dog to be successful, there would be little fun and reward in the game.

8) Use differential rewards and present choices to build accuracy and understanding

As your dog shows they love the "comfort" game and are excited and energized to play it, begin to withhold rewards and see if your dog will be more persistent or try harder to get you to restart the game. Only reward behaviors that are more like what you really want. For example, maybe you want all 4 feet on the wobble board instead of just a random number, so now you only present the chance to tug if your dog accidentally puts all 4 feet on as they are trying to get you to restart. This then becomes your new criteria that you are now training. Note: accidentally is not quite right, they are likely to try to put all 4 feet on if your placement of reward has been presented in the middle of the board by banging the tug toy there.

9) Help the dog generalize the behavior

Play your games in as many locations as you can, with as many scenarios as you can.

10) Raise criteria one step toward finished behavior, start over at 3)

Even the most complicated agility behaviors can be broken down and taught piece by piece using this approach. Ultimately you will either have built a complex behavior from a simple one, or you will assemble two behaviors your dog already knows into a more complex one.