

# DEALING WITH DISTRACTIONS

## DISTRACTIONS

Dogs do not generalise well— it is common for frustrated dog owners to state ‘but I KNOW he knows how to do it’ when they ask their dog to sit to greet a new person at the park....but the sit just doesn’t happen!

There should be a strong emphasis on taking training on the road—beyond the backyard or training class. Once your dog has learnt a behaviour at home it is important to practice, and highly reinforce, this behaviour in as many different environments as possible.

- At home, train in different locations—inside/outside, different times of the day, other family members/friends/pets present or not present etc
- At home, you as the handler can vary your position—train sitting down, standing up, with your dog in front of you, by your side, behind you etc
- Choose a variety of locations to walk your dog and incorporate training in to your daily outings
- Train and play with your dog around a variety of distractions (other dogs/different animals/children/traffic/novel sounds & noises) on a regular basis—highly reinforce focus on you!
- Ensure that all members of the household are training and reinforcing desirable behaviours

Be a keen observer of dog body language. We want our dog calm and under threshold (not reacting to the distraction/trigger) - if arousal starts to escalate MOVE YOUR DOG! Distance is your friend—walk your dog away to a distance where you can observe him return to being calm and focused on you. By using distance and moving your dog, you are decreasing the intensity of the distraction, which sets your dog up for success.

## DISTRACTIONS AND YOUR DOG’S NOSE!

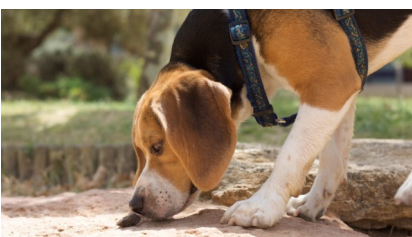
As humans, we primarily use vision to explore our world—we LOOK! Although dogs do use vision to investigate their world, their primary sense is their amazing sense of smell!

Dog owners often feel that they need to ‘control’ their dog in a new environment, so shorten up the lead....taking away the dog’s ability to explore their world naturally (with their nose to the ground!). Without being able to use their nose effectively, the dog now switches to using predominately vision—and may start to alert to visual distractions and triggers in the environment.

When our dog is investigating a new environment it is important to give them the opportunity to put their nose to the ground and SMELL!

### A human example:

Imagine sitting on a busy train—if you have nothing else to do you start to look around and alert to the school kids joking around, the mother comforting her overtired toddler, the rough looking characters who just stepped on the train and appear to be up to no good....as we look around we start to alert to these distractions, and certain distractions (like the rough looking characters!) can make us feel uneasy. NOW, picture yourself on the same busy train, but you have in your hands a favourite book, and as you read you immerse yourself in to the story.... the distractions of the outside world fade and disappear....and if you are not careful you can become so immersed in the good book that you miss getting off at the right station!



Dogs may not be able to immerse themselves in to a good book, BUT they can absolutely become immersed in to the amazing world of smells! Distractions they may have alerted too now fade in to the background, as they sniff and explore using their powerful noses!

## LOOK AT THAT GAME

Leslie McDevitt has created a fabulous game and sums it up pretty well when she says, (quote)

*"This game is a simple behaviour chain of two "orienting" behaviours. The dog looks at a certain stimulus in the environment & then turns back to look at you. Rather than just using a Watch Me cue, LAT actively teaches dogs to read stimuli such as running dogs, as an environmental cue to automatically reconnect with you. Once you have taught this game, you can relax & let the environment do the work for you. Instead of you having to react once the dog has noticed something, & then having to ask your dog to watch you when he is already in the process of reacting, we can flip the tables here & teach him to tell you when he sees something.*

*In other words this game changes the "conversation" When a motion-triggered dog sees a trigger, such as another dog running an agility course, the handler typically asks the dog to pay attention to her & the dog typically responds with "that would be very hard for me right now, since my instincts have taken over & I really can't hear you!!" LAT changes that conversation so when the dog sees another dog running, he immediately turns to his handler & says "there's a dog running over there....did you know about this" Reframing the trigger into something that your dog can "point out" to you, then collect a "finder's fee", keeps him in an operant or thinking state of mind when he sees that trigger, rather than his going into react mode or chase mode. Trying to make a dog only look at you around things that trigger an instinctive response can be difficult & frustrating. It is both safer & a lot more pleasant for both members of the team if the dog learns that he can see those things & stay thoughtful & play a game with his handler instead of answering the call of the wild."*

For more great focus games and ideas have a look at

Leslie McDevitt's book 'Control Unleashed'

### HOW TO TEACH THE GAME:

#### Step One:

1. Practice with a neutral stimulus—an object (say a stuffed toy) held behind your back
2. Present the object and mark ('YES' or CLICK) your dog for looking at the object—followed by a yummy treat as the reinforcer
3. Repeat this exercise with a neutral stimulus in a variety of locations (different rooms of the house, back yard, front yard etc)
4. Once your dog is keen to LOOK at objects for a ('YES' or CLICK) and treat then it is time to take the skill on the road

#### Step Two:

1. Mark ('YES' or CLICK) the exact moment the dog looks at the stimulus
2. Release the treat a few steps away so he moves slightly away from the stimulus—giving him space, and then reset for another repetition of the LAT game
3. If your dog doesn't turn back to you the moment you mark ('YES' or CLICK) then you are too close to the stimulus—increase distance to decrease intensity of the stimulus
4. Give your dog a choice—if he chooses to stop playing the LAT game it is time to move on—turn and start to move away and allow your dog to put his nose to the ground and enjoy a relaxing sniffy walk!



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