

Category: Common Problems ▫

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Title: Barrier Training ▫

This is in response to Bego Aguilera's question about how to keep the dogs out of the kitchen when he doesn't particularly care if they go to their mat.

I trained Bidge (my Belgian Sheepdog) to stay out of my computer nook using the clicker and a target stick, but I have since realized that the dog doesn't necessarily need to know targeting in order for this to work.

So! Get or find something that acts as a visible barrier to the dog. It can be a dowel, a yardstick (meter stick?), a piece of heavy cord, a leash, a board, anything that is about a yard or metre long (the width of the doorway, in other words). So long as the dog can see it and it's fairly easy to move, it doesn't really matter just what it is.

Lay the barrier object on the floor or ground somewhere. Don't put it against the kitchen door yet. Maneuver things so that you are on one side and the dog is on the other side. When the dog approaches you, click when they are near but still on the other side of. For greater efficiency in training, I'd toss the treat across the barrier and in back of the dog. That way the dog is automatically set up to approach the barrier and you can do another trial again immediately.

After several clicks at the barrier, the dog will be hesitating there, probably wondering WHY you are clicking. Keep clicking the dog for being on the other side of the barrier until you see that the dog is definitely slowing down and waiting to hear you click.

Now start clicking the longer hesitation/waits. Actually, what is most successful is to STOP clicking the very shortest hesitations--the lowest 10% of responses. Amazingly quickly, you will have a dog that waits on the other side of the barrier for quite a few seconds. Now, move the barrier to another location. Go all the way back to kindergarten--your dog probably won't recognize the barrier in a new location. When you are working in an old location, work on extending the amount of time the dog waits before you click. When you move to a the new location, go back to kindergarten and re-build the wait (it will happen faster each time).

When you've worked the dog up to thirty seconds or so of waiting, start incorporating your own moving around (yes, you'll have to go back to kindergarten the first few times you move around--new criteria).

At some point, the dog will fidget, turn may even move away from the barrier. THIS IS GREAT! Keep track of your time schedule and click/treat even if the dog wasn't at the barrier constantly. After all, is this not the goal behavior you want? The dog can do anything as long as the dog doesn't cross the barrier.

Eventually, start practicing with the barrier across the kitchen doorway. Treat it exactly as you treated any other new location: go back to kindergarten and then build duration.

Now, if the dog DOES enter the kitchen, what to do? I would develop a signal to mean "the cookie is being withdrawn." Do this as a separate exercise. Pick a signal (a sharp "ah-ah" or wooden or yes, Fisher Disks). You can work alone or with a partner. If you work alone, you drop treats on the floor and say "okay" as each treat is dropped (or the Catalan equivalent). Drop the treats unpredictably so that the dog isn't quite sure where the next fall.

Once the dog is absolutely and positively convinced that they have figured out this game (and it's well on the way to being their favorite game of all time), drop a treat, make the sound you picked, and then either slap your foot over the treat or pick the treat up with your hand (depending on how fast you are). Ignore the dog for a few seconds, then pick up that treat and go back to dropping treats and saying okay. When the dog is relaxed and focused on hunting the next goodie, repeat the sound and withdrawal of the treat.

If you are working with a partner, have your partner do the above while you sit in a chair 4-8 feet away. When the partner makes the noise and withdraws the treat, then YOU coax the dog over and give the dog treats.

Now you have created a Conditioned Negative Punisher (CNP)--a signal which means "you're missing out on the cookie." Use the CNP when the dog's front foot crosses the barrier--don't wait for the whole dog to cross, use the CNP for that first reach of a foot over the barrier.

As for the targeting question--yes, putting food on the target stick will work. Another, subtly different, technique is to rub the end of the target stick with something fragrant, like a cut clove or a piece of fatty sausage so that the end of the target stick smells wonderful but does not actually provide the reward. When the dog sniffs the target, click and treat. I prefer this one because I want the dog to learn as quickly as possible that it is their action in OPERATING the target stick (bumping it with their nose) that is inspiring you to click and treat. The target stick is not the reward in and of itself, it's just a means to an end.

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The Well Mannered Dog