

Mark & Reward Training



1. Choosing & Loading a Marker
2. Eye Contact as a Default Behavior

CHOOSING A MARKER

A **Marker** is a consistent audible sound (or flash of light or vibrating collar, if you have a deaf dog) that is consistently paired with food to create an association for your dog between the sound and the food (or the marker and the reward).

The sound can be a clicker, a word, or a whistle, but it must be consistent. The Marker can be a short word like “Yes” or “Click.” **A note of caution:** The word “Good” is used as praise quite a bit and generally is not a good marker word. The Marker can also be a sound like a clicker or a clicking sound with your mouth. Choose a Marker that is easy for you and all those in your family who want to train the dog.

Creating a Marker helps to improve your timing in letting your dog know they have performed the desired action (or small approximation toward the desired action). It also allows you to get distance from your dog and to have better success when training complex behaviors, as the Marker creates a bridge between the behavior and the delivery of the reward.

LOADING YOUR MARKER

Say “Yes!” and feed over and over in rapid succession for 2-3 days in many short sessions each day (two minutes or less per session), during commercial breaks on TV, etc. – anytime you can spare a few minutes. Have the entire household participate (only one person per session).

- * All food, including meals, can be fed in this manner – pre-measure the food for the day and do “Yes” work from this “daily stash”. Working for food helps create a work ethic and better attention to the handler!
- * Remember, **DO NOT** move your hands to feed the treat until **AFTER** you have said “Yes”. This is very important. The “Yes” word is **NOT** the reward itself, nor is it a way to get attention from your dog. “Yes” marks a moment of good behavior and signals that a reward is **COMING**.
- * **Test to see if the “Yes” marker is working:** Wait until your dog is not paying attention or looking away while doing something that is rewardable (such as sit or down) and then say “Yes!”. If he/she snaps their head in your direction, then you are ready to move on.

EYE CONTACT

The objective of teaching your dog **Eye Contact** as a default behavior is to have them check in with you any time they see something in the environment that is interesting or stimulating. If your dog is looking at you, your dog is thinking about you and you are relevant. They're probably not doing much wrong if they are gazing at you. We ideally want our dogs to look at us if they see anything interesting, exciting, concerning, or scary, rather than lunging, barking, aggressing, or trying to bolt.

* Avoid teaching a "watch me" or "look at me" command, as this teaches the dog to look at you only when you ask instead of teaching eye contact as a default behavior. Any time your dog looks at you, feel free to mark and reward it!

GAMES: Once your dog understands the "Yes" marker, you may begin training for default eye contact using the following exercises:

Made You Look: Have your dog on a leash and step on it to prevent your dog from wandering off. Show the dog that you have food/treats in both hands by putting them close to his mouth (he can sniff and lick but can't have it). Then place your hands low at waist height. Let the dog try to get food from your closed hands as long as he wants (we want to teach him this will NEVER pay; this is the first distraction/temptation your dog will learn to ignore).

* WAIT FOR IT – *be patient* – you can make a tiny noise to help him to look up if you have been waiting minutes, but be very careful not to get in the habit of prompting him to look at you because ultimately want this to be his decision (default behavior).

* Have "Yes" on the tip of your tongue, ready to mark "Yes!" and reward as soon as you get even a glance of eye contact. Reward randomly from both hands (so your dog doesn't learn to anticipate which hand the reward is coming from).

Boomerang: With your dog on a leash (you should be holding just the loop of the leash) toss a large biscuit or other food item in front of you just out of the dog's reach at the end of the leash. If your dog is VERY strong and/or larger than you, toss the biscuit farther away.

* Allow your dog to strain at the end of the leash attempting to get to the biscuit, but DO NOT allow the dog to get the biscuit off the ground. The moment that she pauses or disengages from the biscuit in any way mark "Yes" and reward. Be prepared that she may immediately go back to try and get the biscuit.

* Work up to only rewarding your dog for offering you eye contact. Ultimately we want your dog not to even try for the biscuit even though it is flying through the air or lying on the ground just feet away. The goal is for your dog to recognize that all resources (and all good stuff) come from you and he should not try to get things for himself.

Mine: See handout from MySmartPuppy.com.

** Repeat these steps and games as often as you'd like, but remember to keep your training sessions short (less than two minutes). Once it is easy for your dog to offer you eye contact in low distraction environments like the kitchen or living room, start to work on this behavior with more distractions (in the backyard or while on a walk).