

Homeward Bound Golden Retriever Rescue

Golden Rule Training

Impulse Control for Dogs

The psychology of impulse control refers to a person's ability to delay gratification or resist their immediate need, urge or temptation that could harm them or others, therefore, impulse control translates to self-control or self-restraint. Small children have no impulse control, but they learn it from their parents and environment as they develop.

Dogs, especially adolescent dogs, are similar to small children. They see what they want and want it now! Dogs have to learn that they can't have things they want right when they want them. And, they can't do everything they want right when they feel the urge. Most dogs need to learn to control their behavior.

Can Older Dogs Be Trained?

Yes, it's never too late! It's much easier to teach puppies not to chew on furniture, not to chew on your hand or pee on the carpet. When they're small we can pick them up and remove them from harm's way or prevent undesirable behaviors. As they grow and become more independent, it becomes more difficult to prevent inappropriate behavior, so we either ignore it, or they may spend more time outside. It's our job to teach control and minimize their impulses. Both rescued and older dogs may have some baggage that cause anxiety, fear or feel the need to be dominant; understanding the root cause can help us understand the reaction we see and how to help them become a well-mannered companion.

What are Impulsive Behaviors?

Does your dog jump on you when you walk in the door or when interacting gets carried away and scratches you? Does he grab food from the counter or steal a shoe and use it for a chew toy? Does he demand attention? Does he pull on the leash to get to a squirrel? All of these behaviors can be controlled with leadership, setting boundaries and training. If you have not enrolled your dog in a basic obedience class, it is always a good idea to lay the foundation for better behavior.

How do I Start?

The first step is staying calm and becoming the leader your dog needs. He has to see you control all the resources: his food, water, play time, walks, his bed and toys. You are very important to his survival! Now you need to put rules in place. For example, your dog must sit and wait before he gets his meal. *For detailed information, see the Leadership article on the HB website, under the Golden Rule Training Library.*

The second step is to look at what you may be doing inadvertently to make your dog's behavior worse. If he is demanding something, his food, a treat, to play with or pet him, do not give in! As a leader you decide when all those activities take place. A good example of a common mistake: if you come home from work and frantically rush to let him out or feed him while he's overexcited,

you have just reinforced his bad behavior. He will repeat what works and that emotional state will become a habit, now coupled with your arrival home. Instead, come into your house calmly, ignore him, go get the mail and look though it, change your clothes, and then greet him in a calm manner. Once he is calm, then you have him sit for his dinner.

Three Things Your Dog Needs

1. **Most importantly, your dog needs to release his energy!** Adequate exercise is essential and that means running and getting really tired; a 20 to 40 walk will not be enough! You can play games with him, such as Fetch, Frisbee, and if you have a pool and he likes to swim, that is good exercise as well.
2. **Leadership and manners, take an obedience class.** This is the foundation to teaching your dog manners and to listen to you. You will be on your way to starting the process of building a trusting relationship and a leadership position with your dog. Learning the basics of obedience will help you and your dog learn how to work together not just with training, but activities, games and exercise so he is a joy to be around.
3. **You and your dog need to be clam.** Just like children, dogs have to be told to settle down. If you stay calm, your dog will be calm. Your dog can have bursts of heavy exercise, but then he needs to be calm in between. You could tether or stand on the leash if necessary. Then put him in a down-stay in an area in the house where you can see him. Have him stay until you release him. The spot or place you have him down-stay can work into his long-settle and a time-out space where he regains emotional control.

Impulse Control Exercises

Give me a break exercise

This exercise is great for the dog that is way too interested in squirrels to focus on you when you're on a walk, or way too distracted by the other dogs to concentrate on the exercises when you're in your agility class. The exercise helps the dog reorient to you by showing him that focusing on you is what's really rewarding...not by punishing those times when he is distracted.

1. Choose a behavior to work on, such as "Go settle", "Heel", or Sit-stay."
2. You will need an enclosed, low-distraction area like a fenced yard or large basement to work in and a chair.
3. While working on a cue, such as "Settle", reward your dog frequently as long as he's on his bed. And, for "Heel", walk in a circle and reward as you walk and your dog stays close by you and gives you his attention.
4. After a minute or so of working, say your release word, such as "Okay", "All Done" or "Break" and turn away from him and go sit in your chair. If your dog disengages first by looking away or moving away from you, then immediately go sit in your chair and ignore him.
5. For up to a minute, allow your dog to sniff around while you stay in your chair. Do not talk to him, just ignore him.
6. The second your dog glances your way, turns towards you, or comes up to you in your chair, then give him attention by starting the game again and rewarding. Resume your "Heel" or "Settle" with a high rate of reward and a higher value reward.

7. Gradually increase the time of the training sessions, but keep them short enough that your dog does not choose to disengage before you say your release word. You must be in control and release him before he loses interest or reaches his threshold.

The goal of this exercise is that your dog becomes less interested in distracted sniffing around, because focusing on you is so rewarding. As dogs practice, they quickly get to a point where they don't even want to take a break; instead, they remain focused on us when we give the release cue and ask us to keep the game going.

Work in low-distraction areas (such as your home) and then move to a mid-distraction area (such as your front yard) until your dog is reliable with each cue waiting for the release cue. Gradually you will gain his attention even in very distracting environments.

Settle Exercise

We all want a dog that can stay settled in one spot for long periods of time and resist his impulse to get in the middle of all the distractions around him. Settle is a useful dog skill when you're eating dinner, when you have a friend over or when you're watching television. It's basically a long-term Down-Stay in one spot, like on a mat, a rug or a dog bed. Since you'll probably want your dog to settle for more than just a couple of minutes, though, it's only fair to give him some freedom of movement so that he can stay comfortable.

You'll let him readjust his position, circle and resetttle, or roll on his side-as long as he stays in his special spot. Here's how to teach him:

1. Tell your dog to "Go to bed," put a treat right in front of his nose, and lead him to his mat. When all four paws are on the mat, praise him, and then tell him "Down" and "Stay."
2. Count to two in your head. If your dog stays in the Down, say "Good!" and give him the treat.
3. After he's eaten, release him with "Okay!" to let him know his job is done. Encourage him to move off of the mat by clapping your hands or walking a few steps away. Once your dog has moved, you're ready to repeat the exercise from the beginning.
4. Practice this sequence for several days, and then stop using the lure (the treat in front of your dog's nose). Instead, just use your hand motion to guide your dog to the mat and into a Down.
5. When your dog can consistently go to his mat, lie down and stay there for two seconds, start gradually increasing the length of time you expect him to stay on the mat. This will take many repetitions over many days. From two seconds, increase the Stay to five seconds, then to 10 seconds, then 30, then one minute, five minutes, 10 minutes, a half hour, etc.

Troubleshooting tip is sure to randomly throw in repetitions with easy, short stays so that your dog doesn't get discouraged.

Additional Settle Tips

Always reward your dog for his good work! When he's first learning, be generous and reward him frequently, every 5 or 10 seconds. Once he's getting the hang of it, you can gradually reduce the number of treats you give during his Settle.

Set your dog up for success by practicing Settle when he's well exercised and calm. Say cue "Stay" just once. Remember to always release your dog from the "Settle" with your release cue (such as "Okay", or "Release", etc.). You don't want your dog to decide when it's time to get up.

Practice in places where it's useful to have your dog settle for a while; for instance, if you'd like your dog to eventually settle on his mat while you eat dinner or watch TV, practice in the rooms where you eat and watch TV.

Ready-Set-Down!

This is a fun game that also trains your dog to pay attention even when he's excited and playful. You'll need space to run, so try this in your fenced yard or another large, safe area.

1. Start with your dog in a "Sit-Stay" or a "Down-Stay" next to you.
2. Crouch a bit as if you're at a runners' starting line, with your hand on your dog's collar to help hold him in position if necessary.
3. Get your dog interested and use excited talk, such as "Are you ready? Are you ready, boy?" Then say "Ready- set- GO!" and burst into a run, encouraging your dog to run alongside you.
4. After your dog understands the game, next prepare your dog for the next step.
5. As you continue running, say "Ready- Set - Down!" and then immediately stop. If your dog lies down, praise him and give him a really good treat. If he doesn't, lure him into a down with a treat the first few times you practice this, and then reward him.
6. Start the sequence again. As he's lying there, crouch next to him and rev him up. Then say "Ready, set, Go!" and run with him. After running several strides, say "Ready, set, Down!" and treat him for lying down.
7. For variation, throw in other behaviors that your dog knows instead of "Down". Try "Ready, set, SIT!" and "Ready, set, ROLLOVER!"

After you've played this game for a few weeks and your dog's got the hang of it, you can stop treating him for the Down (or Sit or whatever). Instead, getting to run again with you becomes the reward.

More Exercises

1. **Teach your dog to be a couch potato.** Teach your pup to relax inside. Go outdoors for excitement and high energy games, and encourage quiet activities inside. This will classically condition your dog to be relaxed indoors.
2. **Teach your dog to Leave-It, Take-It teaches impulse control.** Tether dog to heavy piece of furniture and put a treat or bone or toy out of reach. Wait for him to relax and look away and say, "Good, Leave-it." *For more information on teaching "Leave-It" see the Golden Rule Training Library on our website.*
3. **Your dog must "Wait" for everything!** My dog Simon has learned it takes me forever to leave the house so he no longer gets excited until we actually walk out the door. Leash up your dog & tether him if you need to and then have him wait for you to get ready. Another great place to wait is inside the car. Open the car door and have Fido wait for 30 seconds before you say, "OK!"

Games to Play with Your Dog

Teaching a dog to control impulsive behaviors by choice is somewhat different from teaching an obedience cue, such as "Sit." Impulse control behaviors include staying until released, when the reward of release is something really, really good and that something is immediately available to the dog, the dog "gets it."

The Watch Me Game

First, attention is the key to having your dog listen to what you want them to do; your dog needs to learn to give you eye contact when you say his name, and before giving any commands. In fact, eye contact should always be given before any commands, games and rewards.

Teaching impulse behavior is a process. If you change your mindset and control your dog's access to all good things, you will be successful. The key to impulse control training is to use many exercises. This ensures your dog does not get bored and continues to pay attention.

As you raise the criteria and gradually make the exercises more difficult, it may cause some stress for your dog. For this reason, give your dog high value treats for his successes; even the smallest of improvement is rewarded. Once your dog is successful, then add distraction, duration and distance to your exercises and training.

This impulse control exercise teaches your dog that staring at a toy or treat in your hand gets him nothing, but looking at you gets him the prize! Over time, he learns to look to you for things he wants rather than just grabbing them himself.

Work Impulse Control Skills into Your Daily Walks

1. Have your dog "wait" at every door, going in and out. The door does not open until he is behind the threshold you have chosen. Then, say "okay", to release him to go outside as you exit the door first.
2. Ask your dog to "watch me" before giving any cue so he learns to look to you for permission
3. Teach your dog to "sit" at every corner before crossing the street.
4. During your walks let your dog "go sniff", but only when you give him the cue and then letting him sniff in their favorite spot. The control comes in as you let them go sniff (while on leash), and then call them back to continue the walk (they do not get to tell you where to go, you let them sniff, then say, "let's go" as you ask him return to you and continue the walk).
5. While on the walk have your dog "sit-stay" while on the leash or long-line, and then increase the areas you practice, and work up to an area that is distracting for your dog.

Sit-Stay for the Leash

It can be frustrating to attach your dog's leash to his collar when he's bouncing around uncontrollably. The following practical game teaches your dog to have a little self-restraint, even when he's anticipating a walk-which is one of the highlights of his day!

- Get out your leash and wait until your dog is calm enough to listen to you.
- Ask him to sit and stay. Then start to bring the leash clip toward his collar so that you can clip it on.
- The instant he gets up and breaks his Sit-Stay, say "Eh-eh!" and put the leash behind your back. (Aim for sounding disappointed rather than angry. You don't want to scare your dog.

You just want to tell him that he blew it the instant he stood up.) Ask him to sit again and calmly wait until he does.

- The instant he's sitting, start bringing the leash clip toward his collar again to clip it on. If he stays seated, great. Clip on the leash and release him from his Sit-Stay with "Okay, let's go." Then go on your walk. If your dog doesn't stay seated, say "Oops!" the instant he gets up, and repeat the immediate consequence of withdrawing the leash and putting it behind your back. Repeat this leash-disappearance act as many times as needed for your dog to get the idea that breaking his Sit-Stay makes the leash go away.
- Don't become impatient with your dog's early mistakes. He's learning a difficult task! With your quick and consistent consequences for breaking his Sit-Stay, he'll soon be a pro at sitting still while you attach his leash.

Walk & Settle

Turn your on-leash walks together into impulse-control training walks. You won't make the entire walk an exercise in impulse control, but you can use parts of your walk to help your dog learn to control himself. During the walk, switch between the following:

- Require that your dog not pull on the leash for several minutes of walking. Let your dog pull and sniff to his heart's content for a couple of minutes.
- Ask your dog to do a Sit-Stay for a couple of minutes while you sit on a bench or on the grass with him; if he is comfortable and there are no other dogs or threats nearby, then put him in a "Down – Stay" and then work on a "Settle" in public (*because a "Down" put the dog in a submissive state, be careful when you ask the dog to do so, if he feels threatened, he may not cooperate*).

Doing these things when on walks will help teach your dog a number of desirable skills, including calming down and paying attention to you—even outdoors, amidst many distractions and temptations. Here's a sample training sequence for Walk & Settle for you to try:

- Walk nicely with a pocketful of treats, leave your house and give your dog your loose-leash walking cue that means he's not allowed to pull, for example, "Let's go!" (For detailed information on loose-leash walking, please see our article [Teaching Your Dog Not to Pull on Leash](#).) Walk a few blocks like this, making sure to praise and occasionally treat your dog for walking without pulling. It's tough work because, to dogs, we're slow pokes and we walk in boring straight lines!
- Pull and sniff now give your dog a release cue that lets him know he's on a break and can pull and sniff, for example, "Okay!" or "Free!" If you have an extendable leash, like a Flexi or a Walk-About™ retractable leash, this is a good time to attach it and release the brake to give your dog the full length.
- Settle down now after a few more blocks of letting your dog pull and sniff, look for somewhere you can sit down, like a park bench, a low wall or some soft grass. Have a seat and ask your dog to lie down and stay. This could be a challenge the first few times because your dog's not accustomed to lying down calmly in the middle of walks! You might initially need to use your leash to enforce his Down-Stay. (Hold the leash or step on it with your foot.) Be patient and gently insistent. While your dog's staying, be sure to reward him frequently with treats and praise. Once the two of you have chilled out for a couple of minutes, say "Let's go," and restart loose-leash walking.

Rotate these exercises as many times as you like during your walks; after you have been training for several weeks you can mix up the order to keep it interesting.

All training can be fun, and you can make it fun and easy by adding cues to your daily routine. Just like children, learning has to be recalibrated often and consistency is a must. Training your

dog does not have to become a chore. Think of it as bonding time with your best friend and a chance to get some exercise for you both!

Sources:

CAROL A. BYRNES "DIAMONDS IN THE RUFF" Training for Dogs & Their People
ditr_training @ hotmail.com - <http://www.diamondsintheruff.com>

<http://www.aspcabehavior.org/articles/77/Impulse-Control-Training-and-Games-for-Dogs.aspx>

<http://doggonefun.biz/teaching-doggie-impulse-control/>

<http://peacefuldog.blogspot.com/2010/11/more-exercises-for-impulse-control.html>

Leslie McDevitt's, *Control Unleashed*