

Train Your Dog to "Check In"

Help your dog develop a habit of checking in with you by establishing frequent eye contact. It's a behavior that will make every type of dog training easier. When your dog looks to you for direction and affirmation, you both gain freedom.

By Nancy Tucker, CPDT-KA

"CHECK-IN" TRAINING OVERVIEW

- Help your dog develop a habit of checking in with you. Start where he won't easily be distracted.
- Reward your dog each time he spontaneously glances at you throughout the day.
- Prepare some small yummy treats in advance and put your dog on leash. Stand quietly and mark and treat every glance toward you until your dog is focused on you.
- Take the game outside in a low-distraction area. Mark and treat any effort your dog makes to pay even the slightest attention to you. Be patient.
- Practice stepping outside with your dog so he learns to look at you and wait while you lock the door.
- Make it easy for your dog to choose to pay attention to you, so he gets as many opportunities for reinforcement as possible!

Recently, while out walking with a friend and my dog, Chili, my friend noted that Chili often turned to glance toward me and she asked, "Why is she doing that? Is she afraid to lose us?" I chuckled and answered "Not at all. She's just learned to check in with me now and then."

Chili is walked on a leash, but she is free to follow her nose, and interesting odors often lead her to a position that is several steps in front of me or farther off to my side. I don't mind at all, and in fact, I encourage lots of sniffing during our walks. My only requirement is that she keeps the leash nice and slack, and that she checks in with me frequently.

Checking in is one of those behaviors I like to place in the “habit” category; I want my dog to offer it easily and without really thinking about it.

The purpose of the “check in” behavior (why or when a dog may do it) varies, but it always looks like this: The dog momentarily connects with her human through eye contact. Chili and I have gotten so good at it that we often find ourselves turning toward each other simultaneously! I absolutely cherish those moments of instant, genuine connection with my dog.

4 Good Reasons to Encourage Your Dog to Look at You

The utility of having a dog who regularly checks in with you is undeniable. Communication is a two-way street, and checking in facilitates communication between your dog and you. Take, for example, the following circumstances in which Chili has learned to check in with me:

1 If she is unsure what to do in a given situation, Chili will check in with me by glancing my way and seeking eye contact for guidance. For example, faced with the unexpected rapid approach of a stranger, she might look to me for instructions on how she should respond. “Friend or foe? Should I worry? What’s your take on this situation?” I might ask her to come closer to me, or I might let her know it’s okay to go and say, “Hi.”

2. If she needs my help with something, she’ll check in by looking at me. If I’m not near her, she’ll seek me out. For example, if a toy has rolled under the couch and she can’t reach it, or if she wants the door to the backyard opened, Chili will capture my attention with eye contact in order to seek my assistance, rather than sitting and staring intently at the toy or the door, or whining or barking at the toy or the door.

3. If she wants to eat something. For example, if an item that looks like it might be edible unexpectedly falls to the ground – she’ll check in with me before diving in to gobble it up. That has proved especially useful on many occasions!

4. Before crossing a road or turning in a new direction. If I haven’t already let her know what I intend to do (by asking her to “Stop here,” “Keep going,” or turn “This way”), she’ll look toward me for clarification.

Reinforce Your Dog's Check-In Early

In the early days when I first adopted Chili, I reinforced any eye contact she offered me as a way to start building a bond between us. I would simply say, “Yes!” whenever she looked at me and I’d follow up immediately with a small treat. It didn’t matter what else she might have been doing at the time – whether she was sitting, lying down, standing, walking, or even barking! My only goal at that time was to make it very clear to her that if she paid attention to me, good stuff would happen for her.

More importantly, I wasn’t soliciting this attention by calling her name or attracting her with sounds or movement. Instead, I made a point of reinforcing as many spontaneous gifts of attention that I could capture – and I do consider attention from my dog a gift!

It wasn't long before Chili developed a beautiful habit of seeking eye contact with me for a reward. Once we'd established that simple rapport, it was easier to start training the behaviors I wanted Chili to learn. Checking in was especially useful when teaching her to walk nicely on leash. It also played an important role in teaching a solid recall.

But before tackling advanced behaviors like loose-leash walking, it's much more useful to start with the basics.

How to Teach Your Dog to "Check In" With You

Whereas at first I would reward Chili for just glancing my way without any solicitation on my part, I soon started adding some distractions and accessories in order to start teaching her some more complex behaviors.

Whenever you decide to teach a behavior that you'll need your dog to know while in high-distraction areas (like outside on the street or at a park), the first step is always to start training in a low-distraction area in order to build the foundation skills. As your dog becomes accomplished in the low-distraction areas, you'll be able to gradually make the learning sessions a bit more challenging by adding distractions. This is how your dog will acquire the skills needed to succeed: Start easy, and gradually make your way toward the more advanced levels.

I wouldn't expect a dog with little or no loose-leash walking skills – and with only beginner check-in habits – to be able to remember to connect with his human while out walking. Who could blame him? There are just too many things vying for his attention out there!

Here's how you can use the check-in behavior to improve your dog's leash-walking skills:

- 1. While inside your home, prepare some small yummy treats in advance and put your dog on leash.** Simply attaching the leash is often enough to excite some dogs, and he might start pulling toward the door, anticipating a walk. Stand still, remain calm and wait him out.
- 2. Watch your dog carefully and mark the slightest glance in your direction** with a clicker or with a verbal signal, such as the word "Yes!" and give your dog a treat.

Try to deliver the treat close to your own body rather than reaching forward toward your dog. I personally prefer to drop the treat on the floor right next to me, but later on, when we take the exercise outside, that might not be possible because of the surface of the ground (there might be snow, mud, rocks, etc., making it more difficult for my dog to find the treat or to successfully pick it up). In that case, I'll deliver the treat directly to my dog's mouth, but close enough to my body to encourage her to stay near me.

- 3. Keep marking and giving a treat for every glance, until your dog is focused solidly on you.** For most dogs, this won't take long! The realization that there is a steady source of treats available is often a very powerful motivator for dogs to focus happily on their human.

4. Take the exercise outside, in an area with few distractions (more distractions than indoors, but not as many as walking on a street or in a park). A backyard, porch, balcony, or deck will do nicely.

Let your dog listen to the sounds around him, let him look around, let him sniff the air. Just as you did indoors, stand still and quiet, keep your eye on him, and mark and treat every glance he throws your way. Let him return to listening, seeing, and sniffing the air around him (while staying in one place).

Keep practicing this exercise until he's offering you attention on a regular basis – not necessarily staring at you, but checking in with you frequently. Now you're ready to add some distractions.

5. Go back inside and this time, take your dog out through the door you would normally use to go for a walk. Close the door behind you. (If you live in an apartment or condo, you'll do this step twice – once outside your unit door, and once outside the main door to the building.)

Stay put next to the door. Chances are, your dog will already have begun pulling toward the street. Hang on, remain calm, and wait him out. Immediately mark and treat the slightest glance your way, and continue marking and treating any attention your dog offers you.

If you find it's taking rather long for your dog to glance your way, encourage him by making a sound (like a kissy sound) the first couple of times just to get the ball rolling. After that, see if you can wait him out again.

Remember to mark and treat any effort to pay even the slightest attention to you. You want your dog to have as many opportunities for reinforcement as possible.

6. When your dog appears to be calmer and better able to offer you some attention just outside the door, go back inside. Keep your dog on leash and play the attention game just inside the door for a few seconds, then go back outside and repeat exercise #5.

You can play this in-and-out game a few times. Your goal is to be able to step outside and have your dog looking to you in anticipation of a treat, rather than bolting for the street.

Imagine how useful this real-life behavior will be when you need a free hand to lock the door behind you as you leave!

During the learning process, mark and treat every single time. Later, when your dog is offering this behavior reliably, you'll be able to taper the treats and the reward will be to move forward. But for now, reinforce heavily with food.

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