



Watch Me

Sometimes getting your dog's attention isn't as easy as it sounds. Sometimes it even feels like they are ignoring us! But consider this: there is a lot of competition out there. There are great things to sniff, things to chase, noises to pay attention to. The list goes on and on. So how can you get a leg - up on training the adoring sort of gaze we would like our dogs to have?

Can't Take My Eyes Off of You

Eye contact is one of the most important behaviors you can teach. "Watch me" is a **core behavior** and very handy to have on cue, as it can stop unwanted behavior. It's a way to redirect your dog's attention. For example, imagine being in the backyard with your dog when he spots a squirrel. If you have a strong and reliable "watch me" then you can prevent him from chasing that squirrel who is busily taunting him. It would be a very clever dog indeed who could chase a squirrel while looking into your eyes! You are in essence teaching them "look away" as well.

Before beginning, arm yourself with many tiny moist treats and a clicker. If you are not interested in doing clicker training with your dog, an enthusiastic "yes" will do. Have your dog or puppy on a leash and go into the backyard. Take a step or two and simply stop. The chances are very good that he will either immediately make eye contact, or will do so very quickly. Use your marker (either a click or "yes") to mark eye contact and a treat. Your word or click should occur with the eye contact and the treat should follow very, very closely. Begin to walk again and stop in 5 seconds. Wait for eye contact and mark it followed with a treat. Repeat. Aim for at least 15 repetitions. You may notice that your dog will want to maintain eye contact. If he is continuing to hold eye contact, use a "release" word, such as "OK" and begin moving again. You are not *asking* for any eye contact. You are simply rewarding that voluntary behavior when it occurs. And it will start to occur more and more frequently. Behavior that is rewarded tends to be repeated.

Rinse and Repeat

Do this for several sessions until your dog clearly has the idea and is offering more and more frequent eye contact. You may also find him offering it more and more at other times. Great! Mark it and reward! You can also start to extend the time that he is maintaining eye contact before marking and treating. It is important that at this point your dog is offering this behavior frequently and you are certain he understands the game. We are going to take advantage of this. At this point, you can start to add your verbal cue *simultaneously* with the behavior. We use "watch me." The beauty of this approach is that your dog is actually learning to work the system.





He is learning that if he offers a behavior, it may be one that is rewarded! We are still not asking for the behavior, though. In other words, we are not using the cue *before* the behavior occurs. We are only naming the behavior *as it occurs*.

Nothing Succeeds Like Success

With the next step, it is crucial that your dog succeeds, so choose your time and place carefully. He should be well motivated (hungry) and there should be few distractions. Warm him up by playing the game as you usually do. After a few repetitions, choosing the moment carefully, *ask* for eye contact. If he gives you eye contact, even very briefly, reward with a "jackpot." Give him 5 tiny treats, one after another, while singing his praises for a job well done! And give yourself a pat on the back as well! Now return to simply marking eye contact, in other words *not* asking for it. After a few repetitions, again *ask* for eye contact. Probably the most important part of this exercise is to choose your time and place carefully, because you want to be as certain as possible that your dog will succeed. Nothing succeeds like success!

Increase Distractions Very Slowly

The next step is to think about what your dog finds distracting. You are going to start asking for eye contact in ever-so-slightly more and more distracting situations, remembering to choose the time and place carefully. It is your job to make sure he succeeds so if you ask and he does not comply, rethink the situation. Perhaps he is bored, or the situation is too distracting. Back up a step and just mark it when it occurs. Putting off the training till a better time is a better decision than trying and failing repeatedly.

This is a great exercise to add to your dog's repertoire and it is one that you can always make more challenging. The list of situations that compete with us for our dog's attention is pretty much endless so we have a lifetime of opportunities to continue this training.

Don't Beg

It is your responsibility to ensure your dog's success, so choose your place and time carefully. Distractions should be added slowly and incrementally. It may be tempting to repeat your command. Don't beg! You don't want the cue to become "watch me watch me watch me." And you don't want him to practice ignoring you, so choose carefully when and where to ask for "watch me."

