

KINDRED PAWS

ANIMAL TRAINING



Mat Training

Mat training is an incredible useful task we can teach our dogs. It involves teaching them to relax in a defined area such as a mat. Mat training is a useful alternative behaviour we can have our dog perform instead of problematic behaviours. We can use it for many scenarios, including:

- Keeping your dog out of the kitchen
- Stopping your dog from jumping on visitors
- Taking your dog to a cafe
- Teaching calm in public spaces
- Socialising puppies or desensitising older dogs

How to begin: Targeting the mat

Pick a mat, bed, or even a towel to start. Try to ensure the surface will not slipp around as your dog goes on and off it, and that it provide a suitable comfort level for your dog. I prefer using something that is easily transportable like a fold up mat.

Start by teaching your dog to go to the mat. Using food rewards, toss a treat on the mat. If your dog is unsure, take it slow in building their confidence. Reward any success you have e.g. one foot touching the mat. Using marker training will make this clearer to your dog why they are earning the reward (see separate free training document on my website).

If your dog happily goes on to the mat to get their treat. Next we will toss a treat away from the mat. We will then repeat tossing one treat on the mat, and then one off, as your dog follows. This is a simple, easy game for your dog. Play this for 30 seconds at a time, and a few times a day if you have the chance. Within a day or so, most dogs learn this on/off game.

Once your dog gets the hang of it, start introducing cue words. For example, you might use “on your mat”, “mat”, or “place” for going on the mat, and “off”, “free” or “get it” for going off. Start saying your cue as you toss the treat, then change it up and say the cue word first while pointing. Then your dog follows the cue, then toss them a treat. If your dog doesn't follow the cue, make it easier with your body language - try standing closer to the mat, to pretending to toss a treat.

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Once your dog is learning the cues for going to their mat, and getting off, we can challenge them with more distance. Practice sending your dog on and off while slowly moving further away from the mat yourself. A fun game can be when you have created multiple targets (e.g. bed, mat, crate, couch, etc, and you send your dog between them. Another hint, this targetting game is fantastic for teaching your dog to get in and out of the car!

Next Step: Building value in staying on the mat

Now your dog understands to go to the mat, our next step is to keep them on it. We also want to help them relax there - its should be a chill, enjoyable place to be.

In your next training session, ask your dog to go to their mat, and instead of then asking them to get off it, we will reward their choice to stay on it. Your dog may be wanting to get off very quickly, in this case, have your second treat at the ready and reward immediately after rewarding going on the mat. Its all about rewarding the level of success your dog can achieve. Some dogs that might be half a second, others it might be 3 seconds. If your dog gets off the mat, cue back to the mat and note that you need to reward a shorter duration. Keep training session shorts if your dog is only capable of short durations on the mat.

If your dog makes any movement towards relaxing, e.g. sitting down, laying down, resting their head, reward that choice. Make sure that when you give your treat, you place the treat on the mat between their front paws and not give it directly to your dog's mouth. This will help to build more value in the mat, encourage relaxing body language like laying down, and help will our next step - you moving away.

As your dog learns to stay on their mat for longer periods (say up to 10 seconds), then we want to start rewarding laying down on the mat. Your dog doesn't need to know "lay down" on cue to do this. Instead, wait for your dog to offer the behaviour themselves while they are waiting for their treat, and reward it. Soon your dog will be going to their mat, and immediately laying down.

Last Step: Moving away

If you feel confident with your dog's duration and behaviour on the mat, we can then start adding distance between you and the mat. We want our dogs to be relaxed and stay on the mat, even if we aren't watching or next to them.

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As this can be a big change in the situation, some dog may need you to do this in very small steps (especially if you have a dog that is laser focused on you, or is very clingy). While they are on their mat in a lay down, casually take one step away from them, and then step back and reward. Slowly increase how many steps you take. However, make sure you always come back and reward. If you are using marker training (highly recommend!), you should mark when you return to your dog, not when you are furthest away from them.

If your dog knows 'stay', then you can cue it here too. If they don't have a good stay, don't ask for one, and instead introduce the cue word once you can get a few steps from your dog reliably.

As you increase the distance over training sessions, you can also add in the following challenges:

- looking away from your dog
- turning your body 90 degrees, or 180 degrees.
- touching something on a counter
- bending over to pick something up
- talking to (or pretending to) talk to someone
- sitting at a table
- leaving the room

Proofing:

If you can master targeting, duration, and distance, then you can put your dog's mat training to the test. It's important to 'proof' or practice your dog's skills in the situations you want to use them. I recommend start with a set up scenario, e.g. specifically go to a quiet cafe, practice with friend around, or use daily in situations like when you are cooking in the kitchen.