

Basic Crate Manners:

Establishing Your Rules for a Reliable Lead-Out

By Nancy Ouellette



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A solid stay is an agility foundation skill to teach young puppies before starting to train any of the equipment. That way, by the time you're ready to start sequencing with the different pieces of equipment, your puppy will have a strong understanding of what is expected of him when asked to stay. For you to have a reliable lead-out for agility, the puppy must be able to stay or wait (in a sit, stand, or down—your choice) for up to 30 seconds under exciting circumstances. You want a puppy that will shoot off the start line when the cue is given, ready to take direction from body cues. Although the training program described here is routinely done with puppies, there is no reason you cannot go back with an older puppy and use the same steps to help him understand self-control—the basis of a stay.



Use the crate and basic crate manners as foundation work for shaping the puppy to sit as you approach the crate and to hold the sit while you open the door, waiting for a release command. Using a wire crate allows you to see the puppy better and to reward him more easily. By using a crate to help establish stays, the puppy will get many repetitions over the next six to eight months. Another benefit to teaching crate manners is a puppy that does not barge out of a crate when the door is opened.

If your puppy is not crate-trained, then you will have to spend some time making your puppy comfortable in the crate before you start. For those puppies that will not go into the crate automatically, pick them up and put them in. This is a temporary solution: teaching the puppy to go into the crate on cue is part of the crate-training procedure. Be aware that if your puppy or dog is not comfortable in a crate, trying to train using your crate is courting disaster.

Teaching Eye Contact

During the first week establish your housetraining routine with the puppy. Start to shape eye contact outside the crate. By the end of the week, the puppy has a pretty good idea that eye contact will get him treats so that when you start crate work, you will have a better chance of success.

- While sitting in a chair or on the floor, click for looking at you. Where he looks does not matter at this point. Click the same spot two or three times, then up the ante. Deliver the reward while the puppy is still looking toward you.
- Now, click a higher gaze. If the puppy is looking at your feet, aim for someplace higher (like mid-leg, then knees, and so on) until the puppy is looking toward your face. Once you get the puppy looking at your face, select and click for direct eye contact. Deliver the food quickly so that the puppy's head stays pointing up toward your face and be sure he keeps four feet on the floor.
- Once you have direct eye contact, start to work on duration. At first, as soon as you get eye contact, click and reward. Then withhold the click for half a second, then one second, and so on, until the puppy is holding eye contact for two to three seconds. Now, you are ready to start to work eye contact in the crate.
- You can continue to work this behavior outside of the crate, building duration and putting it on cue.

Eye Contact When You Stand in Front of the Crate

Rewards Explained Initially, use food to reward five repetitions of eye contact. On the sixth repetition, click, open the crate door, and let the puppy out. When the behavior is trained, use just opening the crate door to let him out as the reward. The food allows more repetitions (more is always good). All puppies have one thing that they want: When they see you approach the crate, they want to get out of the crate to interact with you and their environment. So use that as a reward. The puppy gives you what you want—eye contact—and you give the puppy what he wants—out of the crate.



Break the Behavior Into Baby Steps Progressions will be very small—small enough that the puppy can obtain success at each level without much effort. You want the puppy to think, “I can do this, and it is easy.” If no chance of reward is forthcoming, the puppy will get frustrated and so will the trainer. Remember, you have already started the eye contact game the first week at home, so the puppy does have an idea of how to get the cookies.

- Have five training treats ready to go.
- Approach the crate (say nothing, you have not given this a cue yet) and when you get anything that even slightly resembles eye contact, click and treat. Since this is the first time you have trained this behavior in the crate, do not expect the puppy to give the direct eye contact that you have when working outside the crate. Repeat this level twice, then up the ante and click for something closer to actual eye contact. Use your judgment here: remember to always make your progression small enough that the puppy can be successful.
- Once five treats are gone, click for eye contact, open the crate door, and let the puppy out. (Immediately take your puppy outside to potty.)
- The key to success is to practice, practice, and practice. That is why you continue with food and do not go directly to just opening the crate door to reward. Repetition, repetition, repetition: that is how we all learn.
- When the puppy is giving direct eye contact, start to work on duration, just like you did when you introduced the behavior during the first week.
- As soon as the puppy understands the game, stop using food rewards and get eye contact for one to three seconds before you click and open the crate door.
- Do not take eye contact any further in the crate at this point. You now have some control, and the puppy is starting to learn there are consequences to behaviors in a setting where most people would have just opened the crate door anyway. The goal now is to develop a sit.

Introduce Sit When You Stand in Front of the Crate

Before you start to require the sit in the crate, you must shape sit outside the crate, just as you did with eye contact. At first, purposely do not ask for a sit when you approach the crate. Your goal is not to have a puppy that will sit on command in the crate, but a puppy that learns to offer the sit and self-control as you approach the crate so that he can get what he wants—out of the crate. Self-control is the hardest part of the stay process to teach your puppy. You are using this setup to teach the puppy that when excited, self-control is possible; and if he shows self-control, then he is rewarded.

Note: Do not add a cue to this process until much later. You want the puppy to learn that if he sits when you approach the crate, good things happen. When good things happen, it increases the chances of the behavior being repeated. The more the behavior is repeated and rewarded the stronger it will become.

Your goal is to have the puppy offer a sit when you stand in front of the crate.

- Have five pieces of food ready for reinforcement.
- As the puppy starts to lower his haunches, click and deliver the food slightly above the puppy’s head and with the puppy still in the sit. If the puppy gets up after you have clicked, do not worry about it at this stage, just reward and start again. If the puppy chooses to remain in the sit, click and reward the puppy again.
- Continue until all your treats are gone, then click a sit, and open the crate door to let the puppy out.
- Once the puppy will automatically sit when you stand in front of the crate, move on to the next step.

Add a Release Command

Add a release command once the puppy will automatically sit when you approach the crate. The tricky part will be that the release is only used on your last repetition. After the puppy sits, click, then say the release word, and then open the crate door to let the puppy out. The puppy already knows that opening the crate door is a release; you add the verbal cue before you open the crate door. You must say your release word, then move your hand to open the crate. This is something you should practice without your puppy until your timing of the process is correct.

At this point, start to reward the puppy for interacting with you when released from the crate. You can ask for a sit (you have been working on this behavior outside of the crate) and reward. Use a toy and get him to tug with you or do three or four short retrieves if you have that started as well. Any game where you interact with the puppy will do. Playing will help the puppy be more aware of you and that good things continue once out of the crate. (This is the beginning of focus on the start line and during your run, and relationship building.)

Add Duration to the Sit



Your goal now changes to the puppy offering a sit-stay to get out of the crate. You can work on adding a cue to the sit behavior and a fast, accurate response to the command separately from the work you are doing with the crate behavior. But at this stage of the game, you will still not be adding a verbal cue. The cue to your puppy is you, standing in front of the crate. There are a couple of ways

that work well to help the puppy understand that remaining in the sit is a good thing.

- **Method One:** When you click, you reward. As soon as your food hand is back to your side (starting position), click and reward again if the puppy is still in a sit. Repeat the process until you use up your five treats. This method is preferred and you can think of it as short duration work. It is only successful if the handler can deliver the reward in a fast, smooth motion, and in such a manner that the puppy does not need to move. If the puppy does get up, take a step or two away from the crate, wait for a couple of seconds, approach the crate again, wait for a sit, and continue. Once the food is gone, release the puppy from the sit and open the crate door.
- **Method Two:** If you have trouble with method one, then click once and reinforce the puppy by giving him one treat at a time, in fast succession, one right after the other as long as he remains in the sit. If he gets out of the sit, the food stops, and you start again. Once the food is gone, release the puppy from the sit, and open the crate door. If the puppy gets up before you release, take a step or two away from the crate and wait a couple of seconds. Then approach the crate again, wait for the sit, and continue.

When your puppy starts to remain in the sit for you (this should happen within one or two sessions using the above methods), you can start to build duration by withholding your click for one second of sit. Next, wait for another one-second sit, then click and reward. You will not need to continue rapid rewards at this point. Gradually build to a 10-second sit-stay before you reward.

Remember, once your food rewards are gone, you will reward by releasing and opening the crate door. If your puppy gets out of the sit before your desired time, turn away from the puppy for a couple of seconds, then turn and approach the crate to initiate another sit and start again.

Add Holding the Sit While the Crate Door Is Opened

Now it's time to up the ante. You want the puppy to remain in a sit while you open the crate door, and then wait for a release. Break this phase down into three steps.

1) Hold the sit while you put your hand on the latch to open the crate.

Have five pieces of food ready. As you approach the crate the puppy should now be offering a sit. When he is in a sit, reach for the latch. Wait a second to be sure he is still sitting, then click and reward. On the sixth try, click, say your release command, and open the door to release the puppy to play with you. If at any time the puppy gets up when you reach for the latch, withdraw your hand and wait for the sit. Once the puppy is sitting, again reach to put your hand on the latch. If you are fortunate to have a puppy that will remain in the sit once rewarded, then reach for the latch again and reward, repeating until the food rewards are gone. If the puppy gets up after being rewarded, then wait for a sit before you start reaching for the latch.

2) Hold the sit while you unlatch the crate door.

When the puppy is reliable at holding the sit when you reach for the latch, start to unlatch the crate. Do not open the door at this point; just unlatch the door. If the puppy remains in the sit, click, reinforce the sit, and then latch the door again for the next repetition. Whether the puppy gets up or remains in the sit after being reinforced is unimportant. You must not reach for the latch unless the puppy is in a sit. If the puppy gets up while you are unlatching the door, immediately re-latch the door so that you're ready to start a new repetition. When the puppy will sit while you unlatch the door, move to the next step.

3) Hold the sit while you open the crate door.

If at any point when you are opening the door the puppy gets out of the sit, immediately close the door to try again. Some puppies will push the limits at this stage since the door has been opened for them to be released in the past. So you may find you will have to close the door on them a few times before they get the idea. To be more successful, open the door only slightly so that you will be able to close it quickly if the puppy does get up. You are still using food to reward the sit and releasing on the final repetition. Make sure that you use a verbal release to let the puppy know it is okay to come out of the crate. The consequence for breaking the sit is the door closing, therefore a loss of opportunity for reward. This is black and white for the puppy and helps him understand that "holding until released" is what you want. From now on, you will require the puppy to hold the sit and wait for release once you have the door open. Consistency is important. Your puppy will learn to wait for a release when the crate door is opened. If he jumps out before the release, put him back in and start over. This procedure will continue for the lifetime of your dog.

Add Duration While the Crate Door is Opened

This step will not take much time. The key to success is to increase the time required to hold the stay in small increments. If the puppy gets up before the required time, close the crate door and start again. You are now using getting out of the crate as the reward. Once your puppy is holding the sit for 10 seconds, it is time to move to the next step.

Add Distractions

By this point, your puppy has a good understanding of what is required. Now start to add distractions. Many distractions may be used (like throwing a toy or piece of food, waving your arms, marching in place, or kicking a toy around), please make them fair to your puppy. Also make sure to reward the puppy for remaining in the stay during distractions.

Remain close to the crate. If the puppy breaks the sit, then close the crate door. Once the puppy sits again, open the crate door and start with distractions again. When the puppy remains in a sit during the distraction, reward with a food treat.

This is the stage when you want to bombproof the stay by having the puppy understand that remaining in the sit until release is what is required. Use a high-level distraction once your puppy is starting to get the idea. Knowing what turns your puppy on is helpful at this stage. Whatever turns your puppy on is what you want to use as a distraction to help the puppy understand to hold position until released. Be inventive, but always be fair to the puppy.

If your puppy breaks two or three times in a row, you need to rethink the distraction level that you are using. Tone the distraction down. For example, if your puppy is nuts over a tennis ball, start by just having the ball in your hand. Then progress to moving your hand slightly by your side, then exaggerating the movement a little each time until you can pretend to throw the ball, and finally to throwing the ball. If you have a failure rate of 40% or higher, then re-evaluate the training process. For the puppy to learn, he needs to have many more successes than failures. It is your job as the trainer to ensure this happens.

Building Focus On You When Released

To have a puppy ready to work when released from the start line, start to play with him when released from the crate. Vary the games that you play with him. Use interactive games where the puppy comes out and tugs, have him chase a toy around your legs, or play short retrieves with you. All this will help build the focus on you.

Work in Different Situations

Now that your puppy has the idea of a stay, start to use this behavior in different situations. You can practice stays many times during your daily routine: sit to get food, sit at the door to go outside, sit to get into and out of the car, and sit to be petted are just a few. The formula you use for each new situation will be similar. Let's use the example of having the puppy sit-stay at a door before being released to go outside.



1) Ask for a sit at the door.

- Add duration (building from 2 seconds to 10).
- Release with a verbal command only, and then open the door to go outside.
- Practice at different doors.

2) While the puppy is in a sit, put your hand on the doorknob. Puppy must remain in a sit.

- Release and open the door—the reward is getting to go outside.
- Add duration (building from 2 seconds to 10). If the puppy gets up, take your hand off the doorknob, ask for another sit, and start the process again.
- Practice at different doors.

3) While puppy is in a sit, open the door slightly. Puppy must remain in the sit until released with a verbal command. Then open the door wider for the puppy to go outside.

- Add duration to the stay (building from 2 seconds to 10) with the door open. If the puppy gets up, close the door and start again.
- Add minor distractions, like your making a sudden motion or running in place.
- Practice at different doors.

4) While the puppy is in a sit, open the door completely.

- Puppy must remain in a sit. Make sure you are standing still when you give your verbal release.
- If the puppy breaks, close the door.
- If you are unsure that you can close the door quickly enough, attach a long line so that you can step on the line to stop the puppy from going out into the yard or room.
- Build duration (building from 2 seconds to 15).
- Start with minor distractions.
- Add major distractions, like playing catch with yourself, or throwing a toy out the door; or if you have multiple puppies, release the other puppy first.

5) While the puppy is in a sit, open the door and step outside.

- If needed, use a long line for added control of the situation. The puppy must hold while you step outside. Use a verbal release.
- If the puppy gets up, step back inside to start again. Remember, the reward is the puppy going outside.
- Add different distractions: throw a piece of food or run past the puppy.
- Release the puppy to play with you.
- Build so that your puppy can remain in the sit for 30 seconds with different distractions.
- Practice in different places; any door will do.

Use similar steps to have your puppy sit and wait for a release until you put the food bowl down. Divide the puppy's meal into five or six portions so that you can practice multiple times per meal. You can do this while you are working your control sit at the door.

You need a plan for every training situation. Sit down now and write up a plan for training your puppy to sit and wait to be released to the food bowl. Break it down into as many tiny steps as you can think of.

Working on the Flat

By the time you are in obedience classes, your puppy will have a good understanding of remaining in position until released. At this stage, you can add a stay or wait command to the process. Practice your stays in different locations and with different distractions. Build distance and duration gradually. Add your distractions while you are still in close to the puppy so that you can reward quickly and efficiently (the puppy does not have to get out of the sit to get the reward) for holding the sit during the distraction.

As you work some distance away from the puppy, start to reward by throwing the toy toward the puppy when the stay is completed. If you have a puppy that will not retrieve or tug with a toy, then use a food tube to throw toward the puppy. Then run to the puppy and feed from the food tube. Make sure that you throw the toy to different spots: to the right and left of the puppy, and behind the puppy. Throwing the reward back to the puppy helps the puppy by defining that being away from you (the source of rewards) is okay. The toy delivery spot will become a place to hang around, thus making your job easier.

When to Add Agility Equipment

Making the progression from working on the flat to agility obstacles is a similar process. Do not assume that your puppy can do a stay or wait in front of equipment. Break it down into: distance (up to 50'), duration (up to one minute), and distraction levels, and build gradually. Continue to throw your reward back to the puppy when you work distance. Train each stage above with different pieces of equipment, not just a jump.

Always be consistent with your verbal release. You should go to your desired position, station yourself for the opening, stand still, look at your puppy, and then release with your verbal cue. Only after you have released should you move any part of your

body to tell him where he is going next.

Train your puppy to hold position until release by using different distractions: for example, have your puppy stay and run away from him; reward for holding position (throw the reward back to the puppy). If the puppy breaks, walk back to him and set the puppy up to start again. As your puppy starts to become solid in this behavior, you may introduce the release to do the obstacle. Do this in a gradual manner at first, one release to two or three stays, and reward position. Gradually change to two or three releases to do equipment and one stay, and reinforce position by throwing the reward to him.



Once you start to do sequencing (asking your puppy to perform a group of obstacles), be sure to randomly reward the stay by throwing the reward back to the puppy to remind him that stay is good. You can retrain your stay detrimentally if you are not careful of what you accept from the puppy and how you release. Think about what a stay at the start line is: is it okay for the puppy to move his foot, slide forward a foot or two, or sniff the ground? If you have defined the stay at the start as "sit still until released," then anything that the puppy does that is not remaining still in the sit, including lowering his head to sniff the ground, should be considered wrong. You should return to your puppy, release him, and set him up to try again.

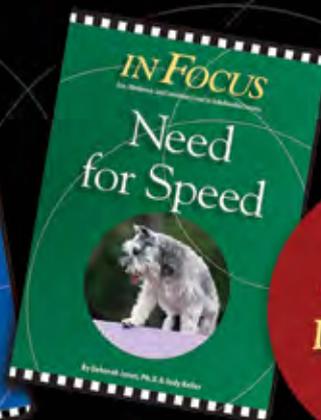
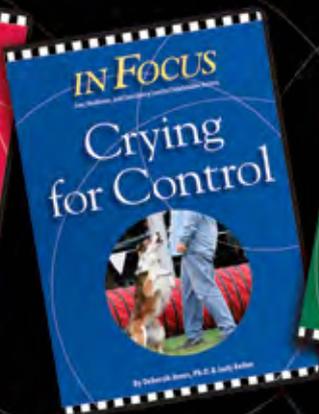
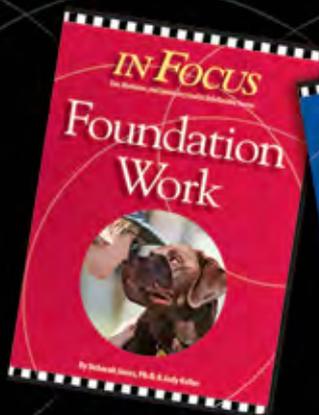
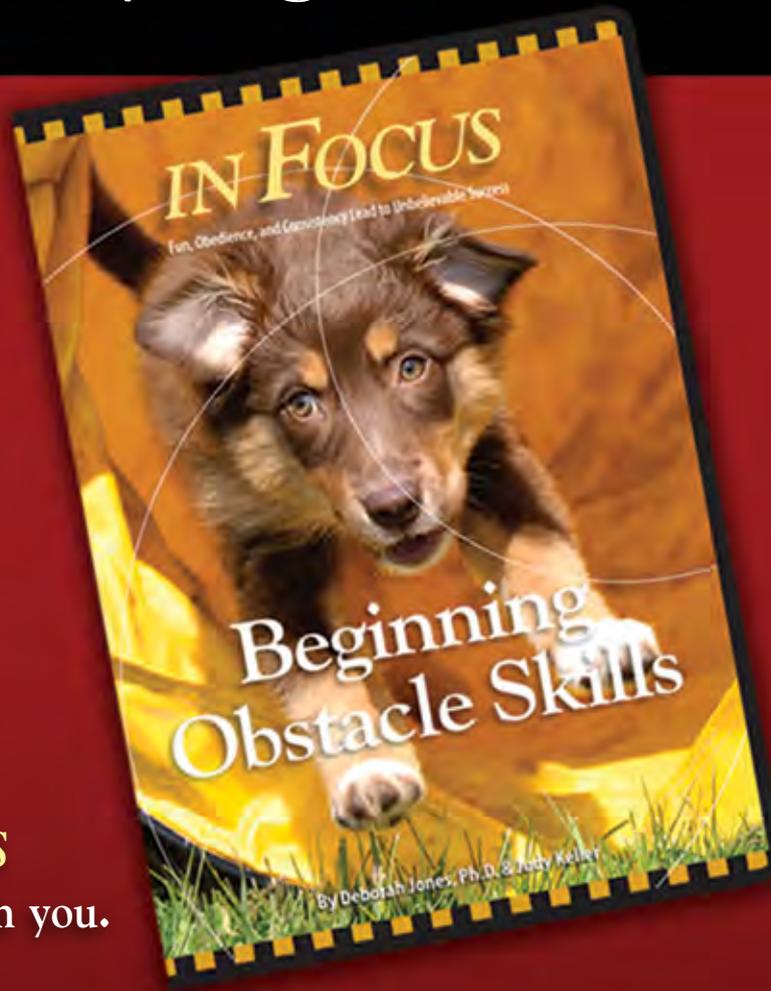
With this program, you and your puppy will have had lots of practice with a stay at the start line by the time you are ready to show. By remaining consistent in practice and in the ring and by knowing what you will or will not accept for this behavior, your puppy will have reliable stays for your team's agility career. 🐾

Nancy Ouellette's interest is in dog behavior and learning theory. She currently runs two Border Jack mixes in agility, Tucker and Tess. Nancy has trained dogs in obedience, agility, and flyball. She teaches classes, private lessons, and seminars and most recently presented at Clean Run Camp and Power Paws Camp.

If you want an agility dog that...

- Is confident and comfortable on the equipment
- Understands his "job" on each obstacle
- Performs each obstacle on a single cue
- Performs each obstacle independently
- Has a fluent, consistent, and automatic performance
- Is enthusiastic in his performance

...then you need to get **IN FOCUS** and get your dog "in the game" with you.



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