

## Mat Training Your Dog

**We all love to take our dogs out in public; to visit friends, on a camping trip and to pet-friendly shops such as Better Pets and Gardens. But, for us to be able to do this and to enjoy the experience, we need to have good control, a well behaved dog and a pocket full of treats.**

One of the best 'games' to teach your dog whilst it's still a puppy is for it to go to a special bed or mat and lie down on it. Over time it learns to stay on the mat until it is given permission to get off.

Once equipped with this skill, a dog is much easier to control when visitors come over and it can also be taken to friends' houses or to outdoor events. By simply taking the special mat and placing the dog on it, there is no risk of it wandering around or jumping on people.

As puppies grow up, we recommend introducing interactive training sessions as part of their daily learning. As well as being super fun and easy, they will become extremely useful skills to have in day to day life.

### GETTING STARTED

"Go To" is a game that can be taught in the lounge room. Remove all distractions from the area such as other animals, people and toys so that the puppy can concentrate and bring out the 'special mat' which in the beginning will only be used during training sessions.

Prepare a large quantity of the puppy's favourite treats to use as a reward. These might be cooked sausage, chicken or liver treats broken into very small pieces so as not to fill up the puppy too quickly since a hungry puppy will be more prepared to work harder for a treat.

### STAGE ONE

Put the 'special mat' on the ground and stand very close to it with the puppy on lead. Be prepared to reward it with a treat immediately as it goes anywhere near the mat. This is the starting point. It is not necessary for it to sit or lie down at this point as all you are doing is encouraging your dog to get on to the mat.

Remember the golden rule in puppy training, reinforcement builds behaviour. The more the behaviour is reinforced with a treat for going to and getting on the mat, the more likely it is to repeat it. As with all puppy training sessions, keep it short and make it fun. Repeat this short session daily over the next few weeks always ending with success.

### STAGE TWO

By now, the mat would have become quite valuable to the puppy as it knows that every time it gets on to it, it gets a special treat. It might even be getting excited as soon as it sees its 'special mat' being brought into the room. If that's not the case, more time needs to be spent rewarding it at stage one.

Stage two is the time to see if the puppy is getting the idea. Make a bit more room for this exercise and place the mat on the floor. Get a long lead to make things easier and have plenty of treats ready. Start by rewarding the pup for getting on the mat whilst you are standing right next to it. Once it has done this a couple of times, call it off the mat and pick it up and move it about 30cm in front of you. Hopefully, the pup will attempt to go to the mat and get on to it even though it is further away. Remember to offer a reward immediately if it has done it. After a few successes at this distance, move the mat further away but not too far that it will be discouraged.

At this stage, it is still not important for the puppy to sit or lie on the mat and if it begins to struggle with the extra distance, bring the mat closer until it gets the hang of it. Again, keep this game fun and the sessions short and always end on success.

### STAGE THREE

Start with a few repetitions of the puppy going to the mat and standing on it with all four feet whilst you are standing close. After the first couple of goes, when it gets on the mat, ask it to 'down' or 'drop' depending on the word that you have used in training. If it lies down when told, give the reward. If it doesn't after the first request, call it off the mat and try again rather than repeat the command.

Repeat this step for a few days until the puppy reliably gets on the mat and lies down and then start integrating stage two where the mat is moved further away in small increments, each time with it lying down on command. With enough repetitions and a high level of reward, the puppy will head for the mat and automatically lie down waiting for its treat. Once this happens, work can begin on lengthening the time that it stays on the mat.

This stage of the "Go To" game requires the dog to understand 'drop' or 'down' so teach this game simultaneously so that it is prepared.

### STAGE FOUR

To begin duration work, go back to being close to the puppy and go through the process of getting it on the mat and then lying down. Once it has received its first reward in the down position, wait about one second and then, if it stays lying on the mat, reward it again.

Call the pup off and wait for it to get back on. Reward as normal when it gets back on the mat but this time wait two seconds and if it doesn't move, reward again. Call it off the mat again, let it get back on and reward; then wait three seconds and reward again. Slowly continue to increase the length of time it stays in the down position on the mat before giving its second reward.

If the puppy goes to get off the mat earlier than asked, don't tell it off as it is still learning. Simply withhold any reward and wait for it to get back on the mat and try again. When it gets it correct, give your dog his treat.

### STAGE FIVE

To get to this stage, it could have taken up to three months but by now, the dog should be able to go to the mat, lie down and stay there until allowed to get off. Now is the time to get this same behaviour in different locations of the house. Since dogs learn by association it can't be assumed that they will perform this same behaviour anywhere just because they do it at home.

Some areas to focus on around the house are the kitchen, lounge and study. Start with the kitchen to stop the dog from getting under your feet whilst cooking. Put the mat at the end of the kitchen bench so that it is out of the way but close enough to be rewarded for correct behaviour. By now, as soon as the mat goes down, it should want to go straight to it as it understands the value of being on it.

Once it gets on the mat and lies down, give it a reward and then move away to get on with the kitchen duties. If the pup stays on the mat, immediately go back and reward and then get back on to what you were doing in the kitchen. Slowly increase the time between rewards.

If the dog gets off the mat without being told, bring it back to the mat without scolding it. Remember that this is something new and that it is still trying to learn what it is that you want. If it continues to get up it could indicate that you are going too fast for it so go back a stage and make it easier for it to have success.

All training sessions should be timed with the first being no longer than one minute. As the puppy gets better, the length of each session can increase. When the training time is up, give the puppy permission to get off the mat and then lavish it with praise, a huge cuddle and a game of tug with its favourite toy.



## STAGE SIX

This step is about working on distractions so that ultimately, the dog can be taken anywhere with its mat and be able to lie quietly until given permission to get off. Distraction training is part of 'proofing' which is what a dog trainer will do to make sure that no matter what, a dog will perform the behaviour.

It is important at this stage to know what the dog considers quite dull as opposed to something that is very interesting and distracting. This will help choose what distraction to use starting with a low level distraction first. A low level distraction might be dropping a small dog biscuit on the floor on the other side of the room whilst it is laying on the mat. A high level distraction could be a favourite family member walking right up to your dog whilst on the mat.

Start with using a food such as a dry pet biscuit that the dog isn't crazy about to begin distraction training but also have its favourite reward available as well. Ask the dog to get on to its mat and move five metres away. If it gets off the mat, it is not ready for this stage.

Whilst five metres away, put the dog biscuit on the ground. If the dog stays on the mat, go and give it one of its special treats but if it gets up at any point before you get to it, it should not receive the reward.

When the dog is successful, start to move closer until you are standing next to it and put the biscuit on the floor without it getting off the mat to grab it. If it does attempt to get the biscuit, be very quick to grab it first so that it doesn't get it as a reward.

As part of the dog's distraction training, bring it and its 'special mat' into one of our stores so that it can learn to stay on it in an environment with other people, unusual noises and interesting smells around.



Over a period of time, increase the level of distractions by presenting different challenges including visiting an agreeable friend's house or inviting visitors over. Don't be concerned if your dog fails some of the exercises as this simply means that it doesn't get the reward and will have to work harder. Keep the sessions timed starting with just a couple of minutes.