

Congratulations to you in embarking on your dog's agility career! I sincerely hope that you will enjoy your experience with the fastest growing dog sport in the world.

In the Introduction to Agility Class you will begin the positive working relationship with your dog that will make you an effective team. Anyone with agility experience will tell you that teaching the dog to perform the obstacles is the easy part of agility training. The hard part is for the two of you to learn to work together to perform the obstacles correctly and in the proper sequence... the two of you becoming a "dance team" on the agility course.

Our training techniques are completely positive; we use a lot of food incentives, combined with "clicker training" philosophies for some concepts. Accordingly, please do not feed your dog dinner (or, at the least, feed only half of his dinner) on the day you will be coming to class. The dog will be more responsive if he is a little hungry, because he will be getting a lot of calories from his training treats and you don't want him to gain weight! As far as treats are concerned, you should prepare a fairly good sized quantity of very small treats to use in class or in your training sessions. The size of the treats should depend on the size of the dog, but in general, each individual treat should be no larger than your fingernail. Some good things to use for training treats are string cheese, hot dogs, homemade liver treats, microwaved thin slices of Spam, cooked chicken, liver, or roast beef, cut into very small pieces, or "pre-made" treats such as Charlee Bears, Pupperoni, etc. Note that these treats should be soft treats that are easily chewed and immediately swallowed. Do not use milk bones or the dog's regular kibble; these take too long to eat and are pretty boring to your dog, anyway!

You will need a bag for your treats, and (optionally) a clicker. The first night we may have Bait Pouches and clickers available to purchase. If you do not have a bait pouch already, I strongly recommend you purchase one of these pouches; they are sturdy, washable, and will last for years.

Please bring your dog on a plain buckle collar (choke chains and pinch collars will not be permitted; if you feel your dog needs a pinch collar on while NOT BEING WORKED, it will be allowed with the instructor's permission). Bring your dog on a 4' or 6' leash; a short leash or tab will also be helpful for some of the exercises.

A special note – you will be given a homework assignment the first week. It will be virtually impossible for your dog to advance if you and your dog cannot complete the assignment. You will need to set aside about 15 minutes for a couple of nights to devote to this homework assignment. It should be easy and fun, but **will** take a little time and effort on your part. Your level of success in the class will be dependent upon your dog's being able to perform the task outlined in the assignment. You will receive homework assignments throughout the class; these are things that do not require agility equipment, and can be done in the warmth and comfort of your home.

If you have any questions or concerns please give me a call at (518) 331-7814 or e-mail me at Trisha@agiledogs.net I think both you and your dog will enjoy the Introduction to Agility Class. See you soon!

Trisha Stall, Instructor, AgileDogs Agility Training

Homework (Due First Week of Class... don't worry, it's fun!)

Part I: Training a Conditioned Reinforcer

A Conditioned Reinforcer (CR) is the scientific term for an audible marker that tells your dog that what he was doing at the exact moment he heard the CR is what you want him to do. It also promises him that a reward is coming. Why train a CR for agility? Agility requires your dog to be working away from you which makes it difficult to deliver a treat at the exact moment your dog is doing the rewardable behavior. For example, if you are working on jumps and your dog responds to your signal to jump the jump, there is no way you can deliver a treat at the exact moment that your dog begins his take off for the jump. But, using a CR you can mark that exact moment and your dog will know that a reward is forthcoming as soon as he lands. Probably the best known CR is a clicker. A clicker is a perfect CR because the sound is always the same, its not a sound your dog hears casually day-to-day and delivery can be very fast. However, you can train other sounds or words to be a CR. It is best to choose a one syllable word or sound that you don't use often in casual conversation such as Chip. Using a word such as Good or Yes that your dog hears in general conversation can tend to water down the effectiveness of the cue. That is, he'll have a difficult time differentiating between Yes as a CR (meaning a treat is coming) and a general Yes.

Before you can begin using your CR, you have to first teach your dog what it means. Start with 15-20 really good treats in your hand. With your dog within arms reach, give your CR immediately followed by the treat. Do this in rapid succession until all the treats are gone. Be sure that you are not starting to deliver the treat before you have finished saying your CR. The sequence would go like this - "Chip", ½ second pause, deliver treat, Dog swallows treat, "Chip", ½ second pause, deliver treat, etc. This procedure only has to be done once or twice before your dog will understand that CR=Treat.

In order for your CR to be truly successful and useful, you must keep it pure. That is, CR **always** equals treat, even if you didn't mean to give the CR. This is an additional reason for choosing a unique word for your CR.

Part II: Hand Targeting

There are many handling aids that can be used when guiding your dog around an agility course. One such aid is hand targeting. When your dog learns to touch your open hand with his nose you can then use your hand to guide or position your dog. Teaching your dog to target your hand uses your dog's own natural curiosity. If you put your open hand in front of your dog's nose he will most likely sniff at it to see if there is anything in your hand for him. Your ultimate goal with this exercise is for your dog to come to your hand and bonk it with his nose when you put your open hand out and give your cue.

Start with a supply of good treats. Put your flat empty hand in front of your dog about 6-10 inches from his nose and hold it there. When your dog makes any move toward your hand, mark it with your CR, remove your hand from in front of your dog and treat. Put your hand out again and mark any movement toward your hand. The timing of your CR is very important. Be sure you are giving the CR at the same time as the behavior that you want to mark. When your dog has offered the same behavior more than three times in a row, raise the criteria (ie require the next step of the behavior) and wait for him to move closer to your hand. Keep raising the criteria until your dog is touching your hand with his nose. Then move your hand to a new location (left, right, higher, lower, to the side, in front of you, etc) and start over. Notice, you have not yet named this behavior. In fact, you're not saying anything at all (other than your CR). Be sure you're not moving your hand toward your dog's nose - let your dog move toward your hand.

When you can predict that your dog will touch your hand when it's presented, you can begin adding a cue, like "Touch." As your dog is touching your hand, say your cue followed by your CR and treat. Gradually begin saying your cue earlier and earlier until the cue is preceding the behavior. Once you have added a cue to the behavior, do not reward any non-cued Targeting. This is important as it gives you control of the behavior.