

Contact Training – The Early Stages

What is Contact Training and why is it Important?

There are 3 contact obstacles in agility – dogwalk, aframe, and teeter totter. All of them have yellow zones (contact zones) painted on the bottom of the ramps. In order for your dog to qualify, he must touch at least one part of one foot in the yellow zone before leaving the obstacle. Some organizations also judge the upside of the obstacle (the dog must touch the yellow on the way up) but most dogs will naturally touch the upside so usually no special training is required.

The contact zone rules are in place for the safety of the dog. If the dog comes off above the contact zone, he's coming off high enough that he could risk injuries to his shoulders, pasterns, or feet when he lands on the ground from such a height. He may not necessarily get hurt in one jump off, but, over time, repeatedly jumping off from high up can cause repetitive stress injury.

It is a common problem that dogs will jump off of the obstacle early because they're excited and are in a big hurry to get to the next obstacle. Getting them to consistently touch the yellow zone has been a frustrating problem for many agility competitors. This is made worse by the fact that in training the dog may touch the yellow because he's not as excited. The handler may think he/she has a good contact performance, until they get a few trials under their belt and suddenly find the dog is playing 'super man' by launching off of the contacts. To avoid this problem, we need to teach the dog a specific behavior for the contact zones that will ensure he hits the yellow zone every time.

The rules require only that one part of one foot touches. Unfortunately it is very difficult to explain that concept to your dog, and if you train for 'one part of one foot' it's likely that you'll get 'no part of any foot' in the excitement of competition. It is equally difficult to teach dogs the concept of 'touch the yellow'; colors are just not that important to dogs. In order to help the dog to touch the yellow in competition you may see some handlers get very stern with the dog, demanding that he slow down in a tense voice, or trying to get ahead of the dog and put up a hand in front of the dog to discourage him from jumping off. Some dogs will jump off anyway. But even if the dog doesn't jump off, this behavior from the handler often stresses the dog, as it may make him feel he's in trouble when he has no idea what he's done wrong. This may lead to a lot of time wasted on the contact obstacles, and also means that the handler has much less freedom to get where they need to be on course if they always have to worry about being close to the dog to manage the contacts.

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In order to get a consistent performance where the dog touches the contact zone, we need to teach a behavior that is very black and white to the dog – something that is easy for him (and the trainer) to tell if he did it or not. The most popular contact training method is to teach the dog to stop with two front feet off the obstacle and two back on the obstacle. This is referred to as '2on2off'. It is nearly impossible for the dog to miss the contact zone when in this position, and it's very clear to him what he should do because he can easily feel the difference between the two front feet on the floor and the two back feet on the contact.

The 2on2off position also means that the dog's default behavior is to find that position on the ramp on his own (so the handler can concentrate on getting where he/she needs to be for the next part of the course) and to wait there until released by his handler. Because the dog is anticipating a stop, he's less likely to jump off before assuming the 2on2off position. And because he knows exactly where he's supposed to and what he should do when he gets there, he can get there confidently and quickly no matter where the handler is.

What about very large or very small dogs?

The 2on2off behavior works well for the majority of agility dogs, especially on the dogwalk, which is not very steep. But very small dogs, dogs with long backs (such as bassets, corgis, and dachshunds), and very large heavy dogs (such as bull mastiffs, saint bernards, and some rottweilers) may either have a difficult time achieving a 2on2off on some equipment, or may risk injury from stopping quickly on a steep ramp. This is particularly a problem with the aframe (due to its steepness) and the teeter (small dogs may not be heavy enough to hold down the end of the teeter with only half their body weight on it).

For these dogs, we'll start with teaching the 2on2off to get them familiar with the contact board and to give them a lot of positive experiences with aiming for the end of the board. Later in the training process for these dogs, we'll modify the behavior to have the dog aim for a foot target placed a short distance off the contact zone. This will be combined with clicking the dog for striding in a way that makes it less likely the dog will leap off. This is not as reliable as the 2on2off (which is why we don't recommend it for all dogs) but is necessary for some dogs due to their body type.

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How do I teach a 2on2off?

WAG teaches the 2on2off position using clicker shaping and emphasizing an independent performance (meaning the dog will perform the 2on2off and hold that position regardless of what the handler is doing or how far away). For this reason, we recommend that all rewards for contacts be given on the ground at the end of the contact ramp, and not from the handler's hand. If the dog is expecting treats from your hand, then he knows he won't get any when you aren't close by, and he may not want to do the behavior with you at a distance. He will also be looking at you as he goes over the ramp, which could cause him to fall off or forget to stop. Dogs will usually go where their heads are pointed – if his head is pointed at you, it will be much harder for him to perform the 2on2off correctly.

Step 1: Teach 'get on the board'. The dog learns that getting on the board with all four feet gets him lots of treats. This is done using basic clicker shaping, where the dog is first clicked/treated for approaching the board, then for putting on a foot, then all four, and so on. When the dog puts all four feet on the board, he's 'held' in place by rewarding so rapidly that he has no desire to go anywhere else. After 3-6 rewards, you should give your release word and encourage the dog to come off of the board. If you keep him there too long he'll forget that the rewards are for his position and think he's getting treats simply for not moving. Taking him off gives him a chance to find that magic position again, which is just as important as stopping and staying there. If your dog is understanding that the board means lots of treats, he should eagerly run ahead of you to get on whenever you move towards the board. We teach all four on in the very beginning so the dog understands that keeping his feet on the board is what you want. If you skip directly to the 2on2off, you'll find that dogs will often have their feet all over the place and the back feet will keep coming off.

Step 2: Teach 2on2off position. The 2on2off position is clicker shaped by rewarding the dog for stepping two front feet off the end of the board. Reward in a position that encourages him to put his back feet as close to the end of the board as possible – later, on real equipment, this position will put him farther down the ramp and be easier on his back than if his front feet were barely off the end of the ramp and his rear was higher up the ramp. Again, the dog is 'held' in position by rapid rewards placed on the ground at the end of the ramp.

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Step 3: Proof for handler movement. The next step is to teach the dog that it's okay if you move and okay if you aren't right next to him. To teach it with the minimum amount of failure, you move just one step, in any direction, as you drop each treat reward. The dog will notice you moved but since he's getting the treat he won't react to your movement right away. By the time he's eaten the treat, you're no longer moving and another treat is coming, so now he has no reason to move. So he learns it's okay if you move, and that your movement doesn't mean he should come off. The movement is gradually made more obvious, by having you take 2 or 3 steps and starting to add a short delay between your movement and the dog getting the treat. Your movement should be in all directions around the dog, including moving back behind his shoulders and moving straight ahead of him.

Step 4: Improve back feet awareness. This step is the ONLY time in the contact training that food is given from your hand. Hold a tasty treat in your hand, with your hand mostly closed, but a small portion of the treat should be exposed so the dog can nibble and lick bits of it. A large chunk of string cheese or other type of soft treat works well for this. As the dog nibbles at the treat, VERY slowly pull your hand away so that he stretches forward a bit to get it. If he steps his back feet off the contact trying to follow the treat, close your hand and take the treat away, and wait for him to correct his position. As soon as he puts his back feet back on the contact, you can start feeding him again. As he gets the idea, move your hand side to side and even sometimes move it so far ahead that he has to stretch his body to reach the treat but keep his back feet on. This teaches the dog to really focus on keeping the back feet on the contact no matter what. You don't care if the front feet move around, as long as the both back feet stay on.

Step 4: Recall into position. The dog is recalled over the board into the 2on2off position. The handler is at the end of the ramp, facing the dog. This will encourage the dog to shorten stride coming towards you and make it easier for him to stop. We do this step to help the dog learn how to manage his body to get a stop from speed. It may take him a few times to figure out what to do with his feet to stop in time, and he'll try harder if you're there because he won't want to run into you. At first the dog starts close to the ramp so he's not going very fast, but as he gets the idea he can be started farther back so he gets more speed. Eventually in class we'll work this up to sending the dog through a tunnel to the contact board, which should add more speed.

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What comes next?

In later stages of contact training, your dog will learn the following:

- To run into position with the handler at the side of the board (instead of facing the dog to help him stop)
- To run into position from a tunnel (more speed, so he will have to work harder to stop in the right place)
- To allow the handler to walk past him and then run past him after he stops
- To allow the handler to walk (and later run) past him or move laterally as he's moving across the board
- To transition his contact behavior to larger equipment (first a 'baby' dogwalk with an up ramp, cross ramp, and down ramp, later to a lowered regulation dogwalk and a frame)
- To perform the contact behavior in the middle of a short sequence
- To transition his contact behavior to full height contacts