

IMPULSE CONTROL

What is Impulse Control?

Impulse control, in the context of these classes, simply means that your dog earns something he wants by waiting for your permission before taking it. The impulse control exercise helps to teach him your release word. He'll learn to wait for your reward even when facing the strong temptation of something he really wants or is very excited about.

What does Impulse Control have to do with agility?

Impulse control in agility is used any time your dog has to wait for you to release him. On the agility course, he'll be released from the start line off, released off of the table, or released off of a contact obstacle and allowed to continue running. We will also use this skill for proofing some stages of the contact obstacle training in this class.

What benefit will my dog get from learning the Impulse Control exercise?

Dogs running an agility course are often VERY excited, and a lot of dogs have problems with not waiting on the start line, not waiting on the table, or launching from contact obstacles, because they're SO excited about running to the next obstacle. For most dogs, getting to continue running and doing more equipment is something they really want, because it's fun. So it's very hard for some dogs to wait for permission before continuing on the course.

In this training exercise, your dog is released to get a treat in your hand. He really wants that treat and is very excited about getting it! (Note: If he's not super excited about the treats you're using, find something that does get him excited). He quickly learns that the only way to get it is to hold himself back from taking it until he hears that magic release word. If he goes before you release him, the thing he wants so badly goes away! The more he wants the reward, the more he'll focus on waiting for the release word because he'll soon learn that's the only way to get what he wants. He will learn to view your release cue as a reward, because every time you use it, he is released to something he really wants.

If he sees the release word as a reward, that gives you a legal way to reward him in an agility trial situation every time he waits for permission. You can't take treats in the agility trial ring with you and give him a treat for waiting for the release, and dogs figure that out very quickly. But you can always use your release cue in the ring.

Your dog will also need this skill for part of the contact proofing training in this class. He'll learn that he can't come off of a contact before he's released, even if a treat bounces out of reach or even if you throw a toy or treat out ahead of him to get him to focus ahead instead of on you.

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How do I teach my dog the Impulse Control exercise?

Put one treat in your closed hand and show your hand to the dog. Ignore your dog as he attempts to lick or paw your hand.

At some point he'll get a little frustrated with not being able to get the food and he'll back off; it may only be for a split second.

The instant he backs off, or quits attempting to get the food, open your hand. The hand opening is how you reward the dog for the decision to stop trying to get the food. Don't wait for him to lose interest – you must open your hand immediately as soon as he backs off even a little bit. If you wait before opening your hand, you lose a chance to show him that you liked the behavior of backing off from trying to get the food. Think of your hand opening as the same thing as clicking him for pulling back – you need to catch him the instant he's doing what you want, not several seconds later, or he won't make the connection between what he did and your hand opening.

He'll probably immediately come forward again to try to get the food from your open hand. Close your hand the instant he tries to get the food. But be ready to open it again when he backs off. This may all happen very quickly so be ready! You should be closing your hand as soon as he even leans forward to get the treat, and opening it as soon as he stops trying to get it (this could be as subtle as a slight head turn or just pulling his nose back an inch or two).

Continue doing this until you can open your hand and your dog hesitates instead of coming forward to get the food. If he hesitates for about a second, then say your release word (many people use 'okay' or 'free' or 'break') and allow him to come get the food.

Repeat this several times until you would bet someone \$10 that your dog would not immediately try to get the treat as soon as you open your hand. Now try holding your hand open for 2 or 3 seconds before releasing your dog to get the food. When he's doing that well, increase the time you can hold your hand open up to 3-5 seconds. Now you can start randomizing how long your dog has to wait. Sometimes release him after 1 second, then 5 seconds, then 3 seconds, then 2 seconds, then 1 second again, and so on. This will help him to learn it's the release word that's important.

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What comes next for the Impulse Control exercise?

Once your dog has the idea, you can make it harder. But be careful that it's not always really hard – randomly change the difficulty so sometimes it's very easy and a very short wait, and other times it may be a longer wait or you may do things that make it more tempting for him to get the food before you release him. Here are some ideas:

- Move your open hand (with food in it) away from the dog. If he gets up to follow it, close your hand and start over again.
- Lower your open hand to the ground. If he tries to get the food, close your hand and start over again.
- Open your hand, then walk away from your dog several steps. If he tries to follow you, close your hand, re-set up your dog, and start over again. Once he learns to let you walk away, try running away a few steps.
- Drop the food on the ground (be ready to cover it with your hand if your dog tries to take it).
- Try the exercise with a favorite toy. If he goes for it, pull it out of reach or tuck it under your arm so he can't get it.
- Try the exercise with his food bowl (note: do not do this if your dog is food aggressive!)
- Try the exercise when you release him from his crate or when you let him out the door to go outside. Hold your hand on the closed door until he stops trying to shove through, then start to open it. If he moves to go through, close it again. When he stops trying to get through, open it again. When your dog will hesitate with the door open, then you can use your release word to allow him to go through the door. Gradually extend the time that he has to wait at the open door before you release him.