Targeting is a method of training your dog to go to or follow a specific target. It has been used in formal obedience training for years; most often to get the dog to “go out” to the other side of the ring in preparation for a jump. Targeting is now being used for a variety of reasons. Whatever the target goal, the training is basically the same. You will train your dog to target something and then generalize either the target or the location of the target to different places.

Step One

Start with easy access to some yummy treats. Scent one hand with the treat by rubbing it into your palm. Put the other hand with the treat in it behind your back and show your dog your scented open hand at least 6 inches away from his nose. Be silent and leave the hand in place. Wait for your dog to come up to and sniff or touch your hand. You can help your dog by looking at the scented hand yourself, which will cue the dog as to where to look. Keep your hand still and be patient. If your dog doesn’t touch the hand in a minute or so, take it away and repeat with the same hand in the original position. As soon as he touches, immediately, bring out the other hand and give him a treat. Repeat this step several times until your dog quickly touches the scented hand. Some people use a word, like “touch” as the dog touches the scented hand. I tend to use a word for this only part of the time, because sometimes I will not want to have to say a word.

Step Two

Once the dog is reliably targeting the scented hand, repeat step one without having the scent on your hand, so the dog is targeting the hand. After a few touches of the still, unscented hand, as the dog approaches your hand, move it backward a few inches, so the dog has to “follow” it to touch it. Once the dog is following movement, you can move your hand farther each time. You will still want to treat, but you can be adding a secondary reinforcer such as the word “good” or “yes,” and begin to phase out the treat.

Step Three and beyond.

Now that your dog is targeting your hand, the fun can begin. You can have your dog target one hand and place your other hand out to get the dog to target one and then the other. You can put your hand between your legs and get your dog to weave between them—cool trick! There is really not an end to ways you can use a hand target. I use targeting to help my dog with the exercises in the sport of Rally, to great success. You can also use the target hand to help with loose leash walking.

I had a poorly socialized dog that I got at 8 months of age. He was afraid of everything and everyone. I taught him to hand target and once he was comfortable with it, I would put my hand in the direction of the object he was afraid of and move it closer with each touch/treat combination and repeat until he was touching my hand at the feared object. Over time, he would follow the direction to touch something that he feared, based on his trust in me. I would also ask strangers to put their hand down at their side and ask him to touch their hand. That seemed to give him the confidence to not only approach someone he didn’t know, but also allow for them to touch him in return.

If you want to do advanced targeting, you can get your dog to target something like a small plastic plate or lid, in the same way that you taught him to target your hand. This time it will go much faster, as he already has the concept of targeting. Once he learns to target it, you can place it down on the floor, just a foot from you and when he targets it, offer a treat, which he will have to return to you to get. You can move the lid farther away for the dog to go to and return. In Obedience, these are called “go-outs” as you are asking the dog to go out from you and return. You can link several things to the go-out such as to sit and return to you via a jump! Fun stuff. You can find many examples on YouTube regarding a variety of targeting exercises.

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