Teaching A Dog To Target Your Hand

Teaching a dog (or cat) to target is a great way to increase confidence in a shy animal and some self control in a mouthy dog. It helps the pet learn that approaching people is a wonderful and rewarding thing to do. It can be used to calmly redirect your dog’s attention when needed and can serve as a way to get your pet to come. Ultimately, it can even be used to teach a variety of different tricks.

Most animals are naturally curious and will readily investigate an outstretched hand, providing an easy starting point for teaching this behavior.

**STEP 1**

In a quiet place, when the pet is calm and rested, slowly present your palm (index finger for cats) perpendicular to the ground and approximately 6 inches away from the pet.

The pet should approach without hesitation because they are curious and sniffing your hand. The moment they make gentle contact, use a verbal marker or clicker and give them a treat. Deliver the treat from the opposite hand that you’re using as a target. Deliver the treat as you remove your hand/finger from their vision by placing your hand behind your back. Continue to build on this behavior by doing multiple repetitions and rewarding every time the animal makes contact.

**Sequence of Step 1 events**

- Present hand/finger
- Animal gently touches hand/finger
- Mark and treat as you place hand/finger behind your back

**Tip:** Not all animals will be curious to approach your hand. These animals can begin by getting a reward for simply looking at your hand gesture.

**Part 1- Distance:** Once the animal is making contact with your hand/finger 90% of the time you can begin creating a small amount of distance in the following order, making sure you are getting a positive emotional response before progressing to the next distance.

- 6 inches; 8 inches; 10 inches; 1 foot; 1.5 feet; 2 feet; 2.5 feet; 3 feet

**Tip:** If the pet is not successful after introducing a new distance, return to offering your hand/finger at the distance the animal was successful 90% of the time. Work at that distance until you are back to 90% success and make the increase smaller. (If you added 2 inches of distance, try only adding one inch.)

**Part 2- Hand Position:** Once they are successfully targeting your hand/finger with increased distance, return back to a 6 inch distance and start presenting your hand in different places. The gesture of your hand will soon become a cue for the animal to approach, thus creating a positive association.

**Tip:** Do not increase distance and change your hand position at the same time. If you change your hand position, do so at a distance they are already successfully targeting.
**STEP 3 (for dogs)**

Begin in a slightly more distracting environment and return to presenting your hand approximately 6 inches away from the pet. Continue to proceed with Level 1 & Level 2 in the new environment.

Making your hand gesture slightly more obvious can also help the animal generalize in a new environment.

*Tip: If the animal is not offering the behavior in the environment you have chosen, find a less distracting area, offer your hand closer than 6 inches, or return to a familiar environment.*

**STEP 4 (for dogs)**

When your dog is consistently coming to a hand target, you can begin introducing the hand with another handler present. While sitting or kneeling close to one another, both handlers will take turns offering the hand target gesture.

*Tip: Make sure to reward after every repetition!*

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**REMINDE RS:**

- Make sure to not push towards the animal’s face with your hand. Instead keep your hand still and allow them to approach.

- Keep in mind that different areas will be more or less distracting depending on the individual animal.

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