

Teaching your dog to make eye contact with you on cue can be very useful. An eye contact cue can be used to get and keep your dog's attention in situations that may be fear or anxiety provoking or simply to distract them and potentially interrupt unwanted behavior. It can also be a part of teaching your dog to literally and figuratively look to you for guidance.

To teach an eye contact cue you need: your dog, training treats (pea sized morsels), your eyes, and a quiet distraction-free location.

1. Begin to teach the eye contact cue by luring your dog to look at your eyes by holding a treat at eye level and making an "interesting" sound (e.g. kissy noises, squeak from a squeaky toy). As soon as your dog makes eye contact, give her the treat by moving it in a straight line from your eyes to her mouth.
2. After several repetitions, when your dog begins to regularly look up toward your eyes for treats, begin to give the behavior (looking at you) a name or cue, like "Look" or "Watch me". Say the cue at the moment you "bait" the dog (i.e. attract her attention), preferably immediately before she looks at you. Then give the treat by moving it in a straight line from your eyes to her mouth.
3. After several repetitions of "bait-cue--->reward" begin to phase out the baiting. Give the cue, without holding the treat at eye level. Have a treat ready. The instant your dog makes eye contact, reward her.
4. Remember, it is not necessary to have your dog hold prolonged eye contact. You just want him or her to look to you briefly. Some dogs find prolonged eye contact threatening and it is not the goal to make your dog feel uncomfortable.
5. As your dog gets better with the cue you should begin to practice it outside in the yard, when the dog is sitting, standing or lying still, and when she is walking by your side, etc. At this point, you can begin to use the eye contact cue to get your dog's attention on walks, or in the house, both for practice and in "real situations" where you need to focus her attention.
6. Most dogs learn this cue relatively quickly, but it can take a few weeks of practice before you can expect your dog to reliably look to you if placed in a situation of high arousal, e.g., seeing another dog or wanting to chase a squirrel. If you find that you still have trouble getting your dogs attention in situations like these, that just means you need to practice more in situations that are a little bit less exciting for the dog.