

# ADVANCED HAND TARGET



Watson executing a hand target with vigor!

## Why does my dog need to learn advanced hand targeting?

This skill has many applications, but primarily it serves as a recall. It's a way to say come to me or follow me. Although your dog may perform this skill very well in the home, they may not do so well in the face of distraction. The greater the distraction the more difficult it will be for your dog to execute the skill. So let's make this skill so strong that if your dog chases a squirrel into traffic your cue results in an instant return to you!

## Here's how we strengthen the hand target skill:

### Let's begin with a review of the prerequisites and critical details to building a strong hand target:

- ❖ Are you rewarding your dog 100% of the time? When we teach a dog a new skill, generalizing it to new environments or wanting to build its strength in the face of difficulty (distance) or distraction (any exciting stimulus like skateboards, people, dogs, sounds or squirrels) we should be rewarding 100% of the time.
  - This means you should always have treats in your pocket.
  - Another way of looking at this is, don't bother asking for the skill if you're not prepared to pay for it.
  - Later on you can cut back the rewards when we move to a variable reinforcement schedule.
  
- ❖ Have you added a verbal cue? To make the skill stronger we will want to have a verbal cue in place so that your dog has the opportunity to respond to your cue when they aren't looking at you. If you've met the requirement above and are practicing throughout the day, you should be ready to add a verbal cue. If you're ready to add a verbal cue, follow the directions below:
  - Say the word you've selected (touch is what I use).
  - Pause for ½ a second.
  - Give the physical cue.
  - Your dog executes the touch.
  - You deliver the verbal praise marker to confirm their response by saying, "Yes".
  - You reinforce the response and strengthen the verbal praise marker by delivering a treat.

## Now let's begin strengthening the hand target skill

### ❖ Add Distance First:

- Use Donaldson's Framework to increase distance gradually until your dog can execute a hand target from the length of your house.
- If you have a verbal cue in place already, can your dog execute the hand target from anywhere in the house? If not, begin delivering the verbal cue from shorter distances, but out of sight. Slowly begin to add in distance, but out of sight.

### ❖ Now Let's Add Distraction:

- Watch your dog when they are focused on something other than you. Cue for a hand target. If you get no response, you know that the level of distraction was too high. Take note and try again when the distraction level is lower.
- This requires that you spend time observing your dog and collecting information about distraction levels. Here's are some examples:

- When your dog is sniffing a spot in the grass they'll likely be less distracted than if they were watching a dog playing 30 feet away.
- Your dog will likely be more distracted if that dog was only 20 feet away.
- They're likely to be less distracted if they've been sniffing the same spot for 15 seconds than when they first began sniffing that spot.
- Continue to make these observations and cue for a hand target at gradually higher levels of distractions. Reach out to me if you're unsure.
- If your dog fails, don't repeat the cue. Just take note and try again when there is less distraction.

### ➤ Here's an exercise to help build distraction:

- Stand shoulder to shoulder with a friend.
- Have them show your dog a treat at chest height, but they will never allow your dog to have the treat.
- You will cue for a hand target.
- If your dog succeeds, praise and reinforce.
- After 5 successful repetitions in a row, take a big step away from your friend and repeat.
- Continue this exercise until your dog leaves the friend holding the treat and executes the hand target with you standing on the other side of the house.

### ❖ Now let's use the Premack Principle and a special reward to blow your dog's mind and make your dog's response almost like an automatic reflex. Think of how you blink when a ball approaches your face.

➤ Here's the setup:

- When your dog is not around, prepare 1" cubes of steak, shrimp or salmon, any meat you would enjoy, but not spicy hot, and not something they've already had.
- Keep the dish warm, readily available, but out of sight.
- Cue for a recall when you're close to the dish and your dog is out of sight. Don't keep the dish on the kitchen counter or kitchen table so as to avoid peaking your dog's interest towards these areas.
- If your dog executes, give them extra verbal praise as you showcase 2 - 4 oz of the special treat in your hands in front of them. Don't put the special treat on the ground.
- Repeat this twice a week in different parts of the house, outside, and at different times with varying levels of distraction present for a month. Then twice a month. Then once a month or two to keep the skill strong.
- Remember this must be a surprise. If your dog is jumping up and down because he knows you have the special treat, do not use it as a reward. If you try this outside, he'll likely know you have the special treat because he can smell it on you. That's okay, just ignore his advances for the treat and only cue for the hand target when he's forgotten about it and is distracted by something else. Don't be in a rush. The more you present this reward as a surprise the more you will keep your dog on his toes, thinking he must always execute the skill so as not to miss out on an opportunity for the special treat.