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Teaching the "Settle" Command

Why teach settle?

Whenever we stop to talk to someone in the street, sit down in the vet's waiting room or just when we sit down in the evening to watch a favourite T.V. programme we want our dogs to be well behaved and sit or lay down quietly beside us. If we give him a specific command such as "sit", it is likely that after a few minutes he will either get up or lay down thus desensitising him to the command. We could of course insist that our dog stays in that exact position for the duration of our period of rest but in fairness this is unreasonable in most cases and virtually impossible in some! The average puppy will find it uncomfortable to stay in one position for any length of time and with larger breeds it could even be damaging to force them to stay in a sit for long periods.

With the "settle" we are only insisting the dog is quiet, calm and relaxed. He is allowed to shift positions to make him-self comfortable. As long as the dog remains on the floor sitting, laying down or shifting from one position to the other are all acceptable.

To best practise the settle your dog needs to have a lead or house line attached. To start with it is easiest if the handler sits comfortably in a chair. The lead should be passed under the soles of the handler's feet and the end then kept in the hand. The lead should be comfortably long enough to allow the dog to stand, sit or lie down but not long enough for the dog to move away from the handler nor to jump up. A good supply of small tasty treats need to be at hand. Now we can simply ignore our dog until he offers us a calm "settled" behaviour, this may happen straight away or may take several minutes. As soon as the behaviour is offered, immediately reward the dog with a treat and the verbal reinforcement of "Good settle". If the dog instantly gets up then simply ignore again until another "settled" behaviour occurs, once it does then reward again. If the dog remains "settled" then we need to keep the rewards coming, don't be mean we want to teach the dog that staying in this position is indeed a very rewarding thing to do. As the dog starts to get the idea, we can start to leave gradually increasing gaps between rewards.

It is best to give food rewards on the floor, we want being on the floor to be the rewarding place to be, not clamouring for the owners hands. If our dog is very greedy then it is best to reward him on the floor and slightly away from us. Try and time the rewards particularly for any instant the dog looks away. We don't want dogs that simply sit and drool on us!

If practised regularly we should soon have a dog that can remain "settled" for 20 to 30 minutes easily. Remember not to nag the dog, we simply ignore him if he gets up, we are teaching him the best way to get our attention is to "settle".

Start the training in a fairly quiet area and only move onto more distracting circumstances once the behaviour has been mastered. We have to be reasonable about when we expect a "settle" particularly with puppies, for example don't expect a "settle" if your dog has just woken from a long sleep or is likely to need to relieve him-self.

Remember to teach other family members this new behaviour as well so soon our dog learns that all people are easy to please with this calm behaviour.