

BASIC TRAINING FOR PASSING THE CANINE GOOD CITIZEN TEST

by Patricia Franklin

The AKC Canine Good Citizen Program is designed to reward owners and their dogs who have mastered the basic five commands of dog training, “heel,” “sit,” “down,” “stay,” and “come.” A dog and owner team who learns these commands can feel comfortable and secure in public and home situations when other people or animals are present. Training your dog in these basic commands will result in a controlled dog who is a “canine good citizen” to the neighborhood and the community and help to combat anti-canine feelings.

You can attend a class in basic dog obedience to train for the test or you can train your dog on your own. The AKC has a booklet to help you if you choose to train on your own. The AKC Canine Good Citizen Program Participant’s Handbook is available from the AKC website at www.akc.org. The handbook is also helpful if you are taking a class with the test at the end of the class.

It is important to keep in mind when training your dog that he does not “speak your language.” Dogs are visual learners who take their behavior cues from the body language of other dogs and humans. So it is up to you as the trainer to communicate what you want from your dog by using your body language, positive reinforcement and proper correction techniques when warranted. Dogs live to please their owners and so once you have established good communication skills training is fun for you and the dog. Training creates a bond beyond just owner and pet, it creates a team spirit. The training methods that I will explain in this article are what I have been taught over the years from my dog training instructors and I continue to use them every day with my dogs.

The equipment you will need to begin training is minimal. A buckle collar or snap collar is recommended and it can be made of nylon or leather or cloth. I personally do not like training with a chain or choke collar. For training purposes if your dog is a little willful a halter style collar or prong collar may be useful. But prong collars and halter type collars are not allowed when taking the test. Harnesses are not usually used in dog training as they promote “pulling” on the lead. You will also need a 4-6 foot lead of either nylon, leather or a strong fabric with a snap on the end that fits your collar. Some leads have small snaps and others have larger snaps, be sure your collar and lead fit together well. Another useful tool is what is known as a long line. This is basically what it sounds like, a very long leash of about 15-20 feet long. This should also snap onto your dog’s collar. This is used to teach recalls, otherwise known as “come.” You will also need some sort of food treats as a reward. Low calorie is best and I like to use low fat string cheese cut into small

pieces. Most dogs love cheese and it is not full of preservatives or artificial chemicals.

The first skill most dogs learn is a “sit” on command. This means if you command the dog to “sit” verbally or with a hand signal the dog will sit quickly and without hesitation. The dog is to remain sitting still until you release the dog or give it another command. It is very important that the dog understand that he is to stay seated until you give him a release word such as “okay” or “free” so that the dog will not be tempted to move. Incorrect behavior would be to move out of the sit whether the dog is walking away from the owner or jumping or lunging at another person or dog.

With your dog’s collar and lead on, place the dog at your side and tell the dog to “sit” using a food treat to lure the dog into a sitting position. If you position your food in front of the dog’s face and slowly move your hand up to the top of the dog’s head his rear will go down into a sitting position. If you need to help your dog into a sit, lightly press down on his rear with one hand while the other hand moves the food treat in front of his face and up to the top of his head. Once he is seated praise the dog and give him the treat. If your dog moves tell him “no” and put him back into a “sit.”

Once he has learned to “sit” on command it is important that the dog learn to “stay” until he is released. Sit your dog at your side. Once he is seated, pivot directly in front of your dog and tell him “stay” or “wait” and tell him “no” if he begins to move. When he is sitting nicely, reward him with a food treat and praise, “good dog.” Ask him to “sit” and “stay” for longer periods of time very gradually and continue to reward with food and praise so that he understands that sitting and staying is behavior that is rewarding. All the time you are training be sure to keep your dog on lead and reward his good behavior with verbal praise and a soft pat on the head.

You can also use the “wait” to teach more self control. When you prepare to take your dog out for his walk tell him to “sit” and “wait” at the door before you leave your house. You can then open the door while the dog is sitting nicely. You should go through the door before your dog and once you are through the door call him to come to you. You can ask your dog to “wait” at the door before you open it to let him outside. You can also tell your dog to “sit” and “wait” before you give him his food. These are great opportunities for training using real life situations. Mastering “sit” and “wait” could prevent your dog from getting into all kinds of situations that could be harmful to him.

“Down” is the command used to tell your dog to move from an upright position to a prone position. I like to put my dog in a curved position while he is down so the dog has to “think” more about getting up rather than just pulling himself up from a sphinx position. Start with your dog on your left side facing the same direction as you. Bring a food treat from his nose to just behind his left front leg in a downward

motion. As the dog's head moves to the left to get the food he will move downward. Be sure to say "down" while you are luring the dog. Practice this a few times and be sure to praise the dog when he does it correctly. Once he has learned "down" add the "wait" to his "down" using the same method as in the "sit" and "wait." You can have a friend help proof your dog's behavior by having your friend come up to your dog while he is sitting or lying down and just pat him on the head. Be sure to offer treats and praise your dog to keep him in the static position. Once he has shown he can "wait" nicely be sure to praise your dog and offer food treats for a job well done.

Teaching your dog to "**come**" when called is very important and can be a hard skill for a dog to master. It must be rewarding for your dog to "come" to you no matter what he is doing. It is also a skill that could very well keep him out of harm's way. Start by training your dog inside your house. Toss a food treat about three feet to your right and tell him to go and "get it." Once he picks up the food, immediately tell him to "come" and when he gets to you feed him a couple of treats. Next, toss the treat to your left and repeat the verbal "come" and when he gets back to you reward with food and praise. Once he gets the idea of the game you can toss treats to your right and left in rapid succession and each time he comes back to you reward with a treat and praise. When you feel he understands the verbal command of "come" you can test it by putting him in a "sit" at your left side, telling him to "wait" and then pivot in front of him while he is still waiting on lead. While the leash is still in your hand move out to the end of your leash and stand still. Tell your dog to "come" and stand still. Give him a big reward of food and praise when he comes to you. If he starts to move before you tell him to "come" just walk back to your starting position and start the exercise over. Correcting him with a "no" if he moves toward you before you call him is not recommended as you do want him to move toward you, just not when he wants but when you tell him to "come." Telling him "no" before he understands what you want him to do may delay his understanding. You will want to praise his sit as you move to the end of your leash. For the CGC exam your dog will need to be able to sit and wait while attached to the long line. Once you have moved to the end of the long line you will be told to call your dog. Your dog should wait in position and come to you when called without wandering around or stopping.

You and your dog will have more fun out on your daily walks if the dog learns to walk nicely at your side without pulling you or stopping short to smell something. "**Heel**" is the command that is given to move the dog forward at your left side at **your pace**. No one enjoys having a dog pulling his master down the street and then jumping up on people or lunging and barking at other dogs that you happen to encounter. Keeping the dog on lead and moving him with you at your pace without him lunging, barking or pulling is the goal. He should be able to walk with you and pass by other people and dogs without behaving badly. Put your dog on

lead and using his "sit" and "wait" take him outside for his walk. Try to move at a normal pace keeping your dog on your left side. If your dog moves ahead, suddenly change directions and move quickly until the dog catches up with you. Once he is back at your side praise him and move on at a normal pace. This could take quite a bit of perseverance depending on how strong willed your dog is. You may only take a few steps at time before you have to change direction to get your dog's attention. Be sure to praise him when he gets the idea that you are the leader not him. You can also feed him as he walks nicely next to you so that he will want to be your companion. A head halter type collar or prong collar can be useful in teaching this skill. When using these training aids very little correction is needed.

All of these five skills, "sit," "down," "stay or wait," "come," and "heel" are used in the ten exercises of the CGC exam. If you and your dog can master these skills you should have no trouble passing the exam. After passing the CGC you will also have developed the skills to volunteer in an Animal Assisted Therapy program such as the Delta Society. Or if you have come to really enjoy training your dog, you may want to continue to train for competition events like agility, obedience, tracking or rally. Even if you choose to be content with earning your CGC you will have the satisfaction of knowing that you and your dog have learned to work as a team and that your dog has gained the ability to be a canine ambassador to your community.
