

Dog Behavior and Training: Teaching Settle and Calm

Are there physical exercises that can help my dog to settle?

Settling in the house and remaining calm when approached or handled are great life skills for any dog. Like any skill, these behaviors are learned through practice. Positive reinforcement techniques can be used to teach dogs how to settle and relax on cue. The goal of a “settle” is for your dog to be both physically and emotionally relaxed. During training, focus on your dog’s body language to be certain your dog is relaxing and that there are no signs of distress.



Why is it hard for my dog to settle?

Dogs may have trouble settling when they are excited, frightened, frustrated, anxious, or physically uncomfortable.

Also consider that all dogs need regular physical exercise and cognitive stimulation (a chance to think and solve problems) for their emotional and physical health.

Which exercises are helpful and how do I teach them?

Here are some examples of calming exercises. Before you start a session, give your dog an opportunity to exercise, play, and eliminate.

Coaching Calm Game

The goal of this exercise is for your dog to learn to lie calmly when you sit down to relax. Start in an environment without distractions. You will need a mat or bed for your dog and some treats. Avoid treats that are so delicious that your dog will be overly excited from the start. If your dog might walk away during a session, it is best to hold them on a leash.

To begin, fill a treat pouch with some small, low-value treats (tiny pieces of kibble work well) and sit quietly in a chair. Place the mat just beside your chair and ask your dog to lie down on the mat. Another option is to wait for your dog to find the mat interesting and spontaneously lie down. Once your dog is lying down, quietly drop a treat onto the mat, ideally between your dog’s front paws. At first, deliver treats quickly, so your dog easily remains lying down.

Gradually increase the interval between treats. Specifically, reward your dog if you notice they are not actively attempting to solicit food or attention. For example, reward for looking away from you or sniffing the mat while remaining in a lying-down position. Also, notice any softening of posture. The dog might shift onto their hip or even lie on their side. They might put their chin on the ground.

As you notice these calm postures, you can introduce a verbal cue such as “settle.” Ideally, say “settle” just as your dog begins to soften, so they associate the word with their position. After a couple of sessions, your dog should spontaneously lie down on the mat and assume a settle without being asked. Reward the dog immediately when this happens.

For settle training, it is important that you use a quiet tone and maintain a calm demeanor. Always place the reward between your dog’s front feet, avoid making eye contact, and refrain from directly handing your dog the treat to reduce the possibility that your dog will become excited and try to solicit more food or attention.

Go to Mat with Settle

“Go to Mat” is like Coaching Calm except that, instead of practicing with your dog beside you, you will teach the dog to move away to a designated spot, such as a mat or dog bed, and settle on their own. The easiest way to begin is to move the mat a short distance from your chair. Wait for your dog to lie down or, if they know the cue to “go to bed,” then send them there.

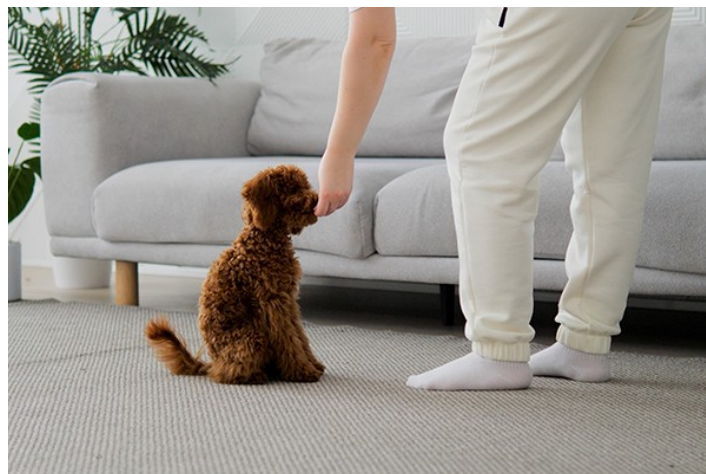
Quickly and quietly deliver the reward while your dog is lying on the mat. And, just as with the Coaching Calm exercise, gradually reward only the most relaxed postures. As you progress, move the mat further from your chair. You will need to get up to deliver the reward then walk quietly back to your chair, or you can use a remote-operated treat dispenser such as the Treat&Train®.

Touching Game

The Touching Game is a variation on Coaching Calm. This exercise is a foundation for training dogs to remain calm when being handled, whether at home or at the veterinary office.

It may be helpful to introduce this game at a specific “handling station,” such as a grooming table or low platform. Choose a location that would be convenient if you want to brush your dog, check for ticks, fasten a leash, or administer medication.

First, bring your dog to the station and deliver some treats as your dog sits or stands quietly. Then, gently pet or touch a part of your dog’s body and quietly deliver an additional treat.



Over time, increase the number of body parts you can touch, the kinds of touch (firm, soft, slow, fast, palm, fingertips), and the duration of touch (short touch, longer periods of touch), with each touch producing a treat. If your dog remains calm and comfortable, begin touching areas such as the ears, lips, nose, paws, and tail.

Do not force your dog to remain still. They should appear as relaxed as during the settle training you have done with your dog lying on the mat. If your dog resists being touched, tenses their body, shies away or even snarls or growls, then consult with a behavior professional before progressing. A more gradual approach will be needed to ensure that your dog remains comfortable.

How do I know if I'm doing it right?

The goal of this training is for the physical act of settling to induce emotional calm. Over time, as you extend the interval between treats, your dog should appear ready for a nap. Their body should be relaxed as they wait patiently for a possible food treat, but they should not be scanning or staring at you intently as if begging for a reward.

When you add a new distraction, your dog may become alert and then quickly relax into a settle. Over time, your dog may even offer the settle posture on their own when faced with something worrisome or exciting.

To help your dog succeed, start from the beginning as you add each new distraction. Keep the settle mat close to you and feed treats frequently. Gradually begin to reward only the most relaxed postures and then increase the interval between treats until your dog remains relaxed even when treats are spaced far apart.

If your dog does not make steady progress, consider a professional evaluation. There may be a physical or emotional reason that your dog is not settling as expected. Meeting with your veterinarian and/or a veterinary behaviorist is a good place to start.

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