



My dog doesn't pay attention

"My dog doesn't listen, my dog does what he wants, my dog will only do something I ask him to do if I have a treat in my hand," are all common complaints that trainers and behavior consultants hear regularly. If it seems like your dog suffers from Attention Deficit Disorder (A.D.D.) and he is unable to focus on any one thing for very long, it's time to take a step back and look at what might be happening.

Consistently is the answer

The good news is your dog can learn to pay attention and listen, but you will need to be consistent with your training. Many people fall into the trap of allowing their dogs and puppies too much freedom and latitude during the "super cute" stage of a dog's life (when they are new to the home) without considering that they are actually "training" their dog to ignore them.

To get your dog's attention back on you, rather than the environment, first resolve to follow through and be consistent with your dog. To do that, think ahead about what you might be training him to do when you ask your dog to, "Sit," but, instead, he wanders away because he was distracted by something more interesting.

You can choose several things at this juncture:

1. You could ask your dog to sit again, in which case you are teaching your dog that you really did not mean it the first time you asked.
2. You could "bribe" your dog to pay attention by showing him the treat you have in your hand which will teach your dog that being with you is only worth it when you have food in your hand.
3. Or, you could tell your dog, "All done," which would tell your dog that he just missed out on a great food reward and wonderful attention from you. Once you

have said your release cue, take a few minutes before you begin to train again, but this time put a leash on your dog so he can't wander away. Also, make things more interesting for him when he is training with you.

The key word in all of this is "interesting." If your dog doesn't find you very interesting, (verses all the other things in the environment), it will be even more difficult as he becomes more established in your home. Now is the time to correct any deficiencies so your dog grows into a model adult canine good citizen.

How to be more interesting

- Hand feed your dog using his regular allowance of food. If you do this, you can use his food to reward for attentive behaviors. No one said your dog has to eat out of a bowl, so use that food you are going to give your dog for "free" and let him earn his meals instead. If you don't have an extra 10-15 minutes to do this, at least use a portion of your dog's food at each meal time to have him, "Sit or lie down," a few times before you give him the rest in a bowl. This is what is known as "controlling the resources," and your dog will become much more cooperative when he believes all good things come from you.
- Pick up all the toys so your dog has to rely on you to provide interaction and play rather than having things around to distract him or occupy him all the time. Always leave out things for your dog to chew, but do pick up all the balls, squeaky toys, etc., so when you do bring one out, your dog will think you are amazing. The



bonus is that you will also play with him at that time. Play for 10-15 minutes, and then put the toy away. Before long, your dog will be watching you like a hawk, in hopes you will bring out the toys and play with him. Be sure to do this several times a day so your dog gets plenty of mental and physical exercise.

- Use “real life” as rewards for your dog. Anything your dog wants should be considered a reward for good behavior. If your dog rushes out the door every time you open it, he is being rewarded for rushing out the door. Instead, teach your dog the door only opens when he sits and waits. To do this, ask your dog to sit. Reward the sit, and then reach for the door and just touch the knob or handle. Is your dog still sitting? If so, reward that with another food treat. Next, begin to open or slide the door and continue to do so as long as your dog keeps sitting. If he gets up, simply close the door and ask your dog to sit again, but *do not* give your dog a food reward just yet. You should use praise at this point to help your dog stay in the sit until you are back at the point where he got up. In other words, if your dog got up when you touched the doorknob, you will not give your dog a food reward until you can successfully touch the doorknob without him getting up again. When you have that component, then give your dog the treat and continue opening the door as long as he stays sitting. Once you have the door open, invite your dog out. This same idea can be applied to anything your dog wants, including his food bowl being placed on the ground, getting his leash put on for a walk, (just drop the leash and walk away if he acts like a wild dog when he sees the leash) or even for things like petting and play.
- Use better praise and food rewards if your dog is having a hard time staying focused. If your dog perceives the world as “Disneyland,” you will need to be “Magic Mountain” if you want to keep your dog’s attention. Use praise that sounds fun to your dog, by using your “kid voice;” the one you use to talk to children.

Also, look for better treats so your dog chooses you when there are distractions. If after you get up the ante, your dog still “blows you off,” your dog needs to work



on stronger foundation behaviors such as automatic eye contact and sits, or it might be that your dog is actually not confident enough in the setting to pay attention. Whatever the case, this is information for you to train better, and/or work on building confidence so your dog is able to look at new situations as an opportunity to stay focused on you and earn a reward.

- Reward more. If your dog did the desired behavior, don’t just give him one treat, give him several in a row so staying in the desired position really pays off.
- Think about what you are “buying” with your treats. Dogs that learn to do other behaviors before they do what is asked, and then still get the reward is another problem that can be difficult to undo if it continues. A good example of this would be jumping on people first and then offering the sit. Dogs quickly put things together and they will conclude, “It must be the jumping on people followed by the sit that earns the reward.” A dog that is asked to “Sit,” but then moves away, does something else, and then finally sits in his own good time, but still receives the reward is another version of this same problem. Use a release cue, such as, “All done,” in these situations rather than rewarding behaviors that are latent and slow. Teach your dog that it really pays off if he does the behavior the first time you ask, and that he will lose the opportunity for a reward if he is slow or adds other behaviors before the desired one.

- Keep your training sessions short. Two to five minutes for each behavior, several times a day is good.

When you use these tips and remain consistent with your training, you will quickly have a dog that is not only attentive, but one that has a strong relationship with you, which is the best thing about having a dog.