

Go Sniff

Objective: The dog sniffs the ground or indicated object on cue and then reorients to handler.

Sniffing is a high probability behavior for dogs. They are dogs after all! So we can use this behavior to reinforce other behaviors, taking advantage of Premack's principle. This gives us a chance to use the environment as a reinforcer with some control, and also a tool to help the dog feel more comfortable in a new space and reduce conflict.

We will put sniffing things on cue, which then gives us power over the behavior. Once the behavior is on cue, we can use that cue to reinforce any behavior we want by giving the cue and the opportunity for reinforcement that the cue represents. Instead of clicking and treating, you will cue the dog to sniff. The behavior the dog is doing when he perceives the cue to sniff will be reinforced.

Often, sniffing will show up in a training session when a dog feels overwhelmed, or conflicted by his options. When we do see sniffing, we can note it and work to change the situation that elicited it, but we can also cue sniffing prophylactically to help the dog feel more confident and relieve that stress.

Once sniffing is on cue, many dogs will sniff less and less.

To train this behavior:

1. Start in a moderately distracting environment. Nothing particularly interesting, just some grass will usually work fine.
2. Point to the ground and give your cue. I say "go sniff". Most dogs are so used to us point at dropped french fries on the floor, that they will go check the ground under our finger.
3. When the nose goes down, click and treat. This will look sort of like the dog is nose touching the ground vaguely.
4. Move to a different spot and repeat the cue and the click and treat.
5. Move to a different spot. At some point, your dog will just be "fake" sniffing. That's ok! It's a feature, not a bug. That's what we want to happen.
6. Now find something interesting that you KNOW your dog will want to sniff. Vertical objects, especially near walkways or entrances are always popular. You probably already know where your dog receives his p-mail.
7. Approach the object, but stop as soon as your dog notices it. This should feel a lot like our Zen game. (See! There is a method to my madness.)
8. When the dog looks up at you, give the cue to go investigate the object. Click and treat when the dog sniffs. If he keeps sniffing for a while, that's ok. Just wait until he looks back to get the treat. Keep your feet still and only let him sniff that one area.
9. Pick a new object your dog will like, and do your 3 steps and Connect the dots over to that object. Stop as soon as your dog notices. Repeat the cue/click/treat.
10. Take it on the road! Any time you see something you think your dog will want to check out, pause, wait for attention, and then give the dog the cue to go sniff it. Your dog will think you're a genius!