

Teaching Your Dog to BACK UP

By Amanda Shyne, photos by Alicia Dube



When first teaching a young dog to back up, I concentrate on body awareness; however, as the dog progresses into an experienced agility dog, I continue to use my back-up command for a variety of reasons. For instance, I often use it in competition when I notice my dog being antsy on the start line, or at home as an exercise to improve my dog's physical fitness and core strength.

The following exercises begin with easy ways to teach the back-up behavior and then progress to more complicated techniques that will improve your dog's core strength and allow you to use the behavior in competition.

EXERCISE 1: TEACHING YOUR DOG TO BACK UP

Move to a position directly in front of your dog so that you are facing one another. Take a piece of food and place it on your dog's chest as shown in **Figure 1**. As your dog curls his head down to get the food, be ready with your clicker and mark your dog's backward step. As your dog moves

backward, open your hand and allow him to eat the food reward.

An alternative way of training this behavior is to simply step toward your dog when you are both facing each other as shown in **Figure 2**. When your dog backs away from your forward pressure, click to mark the backward step and feed him a treat.

As your dog becomes more skillful at the game and backs up at the mere suggestion of movement from you, begin to pair the movement with a word. I use the word *Reverse* because it is distinct and does not sound like any other verbal cue I use.

As you train, try to encourage your dog to back up in a straight line. To help with this, I often begin training this skill in a narrow hallway in my home or beside a fence as shown in **Figure 3**.

After teaching your dog to back up it is easy to transfer the behavior to other environments. For instance, backing up a hill is good exercise for building core strength.



EXERCISE 2: BACKING UP OVER 2X4S

Place four 2x4s on the ground. The exact position does not matter—you are going to change location of the boards each time your dog navigates through them. Ask your dog to back up. When he picks up a single foot, click your clicker and reward. The reward should come low and at your dog's chest to encourage your dog to continue the movement backward. At this point many dogs will pick up their second hind leg and place it on the box. This is fine! Do not click for hopping backward, and make sure each step is taken individually. If your dog repeatedly hops onto the boards, find an object that is not as high, such as the top of a hassock. Once your pup is moving his hind feet individually, move to a short set of stairs as shown in **Figures 5 and 6**.

Note: I like to use wooden boards rather than PVC pipe simply because I do not want my dogs touching PVC since it's used for jump bars.

EXERCISE 3: BACKING UP STAIRS

When starting this exercise I begin with a short sturdy box that will not tip over. Ask your dog to back up. When he picks up a single foot, click your clicker and reward. The reward should come low and at your dog's chest to encourage your dog to continue the movement backward. At this point many dogs will pick up their second hind leg and place it on the box. This is fine! Do not click for hopping backward, and make sure each step is taken individually. If your dog repeatedly hops onto the box, find an object that is not as high, such as the top of a hassock. Once your pup is moving his hind feet individually, move to a short set of stairs as shown in **Figures 5 and 6**.

Troubleshooting: If your pup steps over the box (thinking the game is similar to the 2x4 exercise), begin on a short set of stairs.



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EXERCISE 4: BACKING UP AT A DISTANCE

Begin this exercise facing your dog. Ask him to back up. When he takes a step backward, click your clicker and reward him. Do not allow (or encourage) your dog to come to you for the reward; throw the reward to him or move to him to give him the cookie or the toy. See **Figure 7**. Gradually lengthen the distance between you and your dog as you ask him to back up.

Besides the verbal cue *Reverse*, I also step toward my dog to cue the behavior. Initially this puts pressure on the dog and helps encourage the behavior, and later it acts as a visual cue.



BACK UP AT THE START LINE

While I certainly want my dogs to stay on the start line, I do like having the ability to give them a second chance to show self-control. If I notice my dog scooching forward on the start line, I can ask him to back up into the position I originally left him in. If my dog cannot show the self-control necessary to do this, then he will be es-

corted out of the ring and will lose his turn. However, if he does display self-control and moves backward then he will be allowed to complete his run.

In conclusion, teaching your dog to back up is an easy way to teach body awareness, improve core strength, and provide your dog with a second chance to exhibit self-control while in competition. 🐾

Amanda has been competing in agility for 10 years. She and her Border Collie Dilly were 2008 and 2009 USDAA Dog Agility Steeplechase finalists at the Cynosport World Games. They were also finalists in 2007-2009 in the Grand Prix at Cynosport, placing 3rd in 2008. Amanda is a tenured professor of Psychology at Bridgewater State University in Massachusetts and teaches classes in statistics, learning, dog evolution, and animal behavior. She is a frequent agility seminar presenter and can be contacted at amandashyne@gmail.com.

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