

AGILITY INTRODUCTION

People often tell me they think their dog would be a great agility dog because he's so fast and fearless. Speed and courage are two nice attributes for an agility dog; control is another one.

If you watch agility trials, live or televised, you know how much control these dogs have of their bodies. They can turn on a dime, work the teeter, jump without touching the bars, and run across obstacles that are only twelve inches wide. They do all this under the control of their handler, though it may not look like it.

Competitive agility training can be arduous. Any trainer you work with for competition will expect you to be fully dedicated to the tasks involved. If you and your dog both love the sport and have the time for it, there is a whole community out there waiting for you.

However, if you are looking to teach your dog to do something like walk up a ramp into your vehicle, or stand on a grooming table, we can use some techniques from agility training that will get them started.

Obstacle training can also build the confidence of your dog, and your relationship with him, once he discovers how much fun the two of you can have together doing silly things. I do not use a heavy hand or a lot of pressure when teaching dogs to use obstacles. Dragging them over something and making it even more frightening will not teach your dog to try new things with confidence. Treats can be used to lure the dog onto and across things that may be unusual to them, and lots of verbal praise along the way.

Most of the equipment I use to start obstacle training is in your backyard. A ladder is a great tool to start with. Lay it flat on the ground and ask your dog to walk through it end to end. Drop a treat between each rung if needed to get him to relax and enjoy the weirdness. You may notice that his back feet touch the rungs that his front feet step over. This is not unusual for dogs without obstacle training as most of their lives the back feet just follow the front feet, the dog doesn't think about it. I use a command like "walk on" when asking my dog to step into or onto something, though a friend used "walk neatly" with her coonhound, and he did.

Another set of objects are a broom stick and two bricks. Set the broom across the bricks and ask the dog to walk or jump over it, again noticing how the back feet follow. You can raise the broom stick on more bricks or patio chairs, whatever is handy. I use the command "over" for jumping over anything.

If you have a ramp that you want to train your dog to use, set it flat on the ground and lead or lure them across. As they get comfortable, stand one end up on something like a stair gradually adding height until it reaches the height of your vehicle. Make sure before adding height that they are walking with all legs on the ramp not stepping off with the rear legs. Walk them up and down. If this is something that will be needed later in

your dog's life do not wait until they are elderly to teach them. I use the command "up, up" for vehicles, ramp or not. Whatever you choose is fine.

On neighborhood walks I will have my dog walk on low retaining walls or bricks that are wide enough and sturdy enough to be safe. I will also walk them across picnic table benches, again if we're not disturbing folks and its safe. This is more work for them to keep the rear legs working in sync with the front legs, more "walk on".

Things that move are another option. One of the simplest is a plywood board large enough for your dog to step on, with a tennis ball underneath. To start lure him with a treat to just put one foot on it. He will probably react when it moves. Take your time playing with this; some dogs worry a lot, some dogs don't seem to notice. This is one where the dog needs to go his speed.

I also will use the playground equipment in the park when there are no children around. There are often stairs, some structures have textured flooring, and sometimes they move under foot. These are all good and useful for training your dog to try new things.

My favorite obstacle is the tunnel and I've only ever met one dog who didn't like it. It's teaching him to go through something. You might want to start with a hula hoop. Tunnels are available on Amazon, make sure you get one tall enough that your dog can walk through without crouching. When you train for the tunnel, scrunch it up so it's only a foot or two long, throw treats through for your dog. I use the command "through" for tunnels. As he gets comfortable with it lengthen it a little at a time. When it's at full length, if needed, have one person hold your dog at one end and you go to the other end and call him through. Usually, it only takes a time or two for the dog to understand and then he's running through on his own. Be careful, one of my dogs once saw a large drain pipe sticking out of the side of a hill and ran straight for it thinking it was a tunnel. Thank goodness for a good 'recall'.

While doing any of these things, make sure your dog has a level of comfort that is conducive to learning. If he is deathly afraid of any object give him time to sniff it and just hang out around it. Force doesn't work well with this type of training. Comfort and rewards of treats, love, pets, hugs, kisses and kind words go much farther. Have fun with the training so your dog will enjoy it too.

Karen Oliver

Bring Rover Over

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