



Teaching Your Dog to Stay

Puppies can begin learning short "stays" between 4 and 6 months of age. Begin by putting your puppy or dog in a "down" position (lying down). Sit next to your puppy with your hands lightly positioned on his sides/back so that he does not get up. Do not hold him firmly unless he tries to get up.

Next, put a food treat (small pieces of hot dogs work well) on the floor about 6 inches in front of him so that he cannot reach it. Put the palm of your hand in front of his face and say "STAY!" Remove your hand from in front of his face, wait about 3 seconds, then say "OK!" (or whatever your "release" command is). During all of this time, you should have your other hand lightly on his side/back to ensure his "down" position.

When you say "OK," release your dog at the same time. When he is eating the food treat, PRAISE him and tell him what a good dog he is.

Repeat this exercise three times a day for 1-2 weeks. This exercise teaches your dog the "meaning" of "STAY." He should never be corrected or punished, he should always BE GOOD and DO GOOD, so be sure to make it impossible for him to fail. By teaching this way he will also learn to LOVE the "STAY" command.

Somewhere between the first and second week of this exercise, begin lightening your hold of your puppy during the 3-second "STAY."

The next stage of the exercise involves lengthening the "STAY." You can begin lengthening the time between your "STAY" command and your release command after your puppy (or dog) is "staying" on his own for 3 seconds. Begin lengthening the time to 5 seconds for a day, then 10 seconds for the next, etc. Remember, he should never be corrected or punished, he should always BE GOOD and DO GOOD, so be sure to make it impossible for him to fail. If he tries to get up, simply firmly keep him in his down position and repeat the command "STAY."

When your puppy can "Stay" on his own for 30 seconds, you are ready to begin the next stage of teaching. By now your puppy understands what "Stay" means and what is expected of him. You will begin to use voice corrections if your puppy breaks his stay before he is supposed to. A voice correction usually consists of saying "wrong" or "uh-uh" in a non-emotional tone, and then placing the dog in the Stay again. Do not sound harsh when you give a voice correction. Simply state that he did it wrong and ask him to do it again. Harsh corrections can produce anxiety and make it more difficult for your dog to concentrate on the task at hand.

Put your puppy or dog in a downstay. Put the palm of your hand in front of his face and tell him "STAY." Keep your palm towards his face as you begin to walk backwards, repeating the word "STAY!" Repeat the word "stay" 3 times, at which point you should be about 3 feet away from your dog. *Immediately* say "OK," put the palm of your hand down and call your dog to you. Give him LOADS of praise and, of course, his food treat! Do not hesitate after you stop walking to release your dog; you are teaching him, not testing him.

The "STAY" command is one of the few commands where it is beneficial to repeat the command while teaching. Most commands are instructing the dog to take action. For example, when you say "Down" you want your dog to lie down immediately. It is not advantageous to repeat the command because it only teaches your dog to hesitate his action until you've repeated yourself to his heart's content.

The "STAY" command, however, is instructing your dog to NOT take action. Therefore, he has many opportunities to perform the command incorrectly. As he watches every step you take, and every move you make, he will initially want to MOVE (take action). By repeating the "STAY" command, you are reinforcing his decision to NOT take action, therefore instilling the behavior you desire.

Back to the lesson:

At this point, if your dog breaks his "STAY" simply say "Oops," "Uh-oh," "wrong," or whatever you want that will tell him: that's not right, let's do it again. Do not say it loudly and scare him. Say it matter of fact, the absence of praise is his main correction. Take him back to his downstay and repeat the exercise, but do not go as far away as before. Remember that you want to make it easy for him to DO GOOD. If he repeatedly breaks his stay regardless of the above, you will need to enlist a volunteer to sit by your dog and reinforce his "STAY" while you are walking backwards away from him. After your dog understands and successfully performs his "STAY" at a distance of 3 feet, with you immediately calling him, you're ready for the next stage.

Next, after you reach 3 feet, just stand there and make eye contact with your dog. If you feel he will break his stay repeat the command again. After about 5 or 10 seconds of waiting, release your dog, PRAISE him, and give him his food treat. Repeat this exercise, gradually increasing the waiting time to 30 seconds, and attempting to decrease the amount of times you repeat the "STAY" command. It is more important that your dog does the exercise correctly with you repeating the command than if you do not repeat the command and your dog breaks his stay.

When your dog successfully STAYS while you walk about three feet away from him and wait for 30 seconds, you are ready to increase the distance between you and your dog. Over the next few weeks, gradually increase the distance, and gradually increase the wait time before you release your dog. If your dog begins breaking his stay, go back to the previous stage for reinforcement.

Once your dog understands the basic downstay command, as he should at this point, you can begin trying the command using "Sit" and then "Stay" as well. Remember, it will be easier for your dog to stand up from sitting, then from lying down, so have patience and make it easy for him to DO GOOD.

When your dog has mastered "Stay," take the next step and read about the [Long Down Stay](#).