

2-Minute Trainer: Impulse Control



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Table of Contents

Introduction

Becoming a member of the family

Changing instinctive behavior

Impulse Control Game 1: Sit and Accept Praise

Impulse Control Game #2: Whatcha Gonna Do? (WGD)

Impulse Control Game #3: Pick Me!

Impulse Control Game #4: Ditch the bowl

Impulse Control Game #5: Take it/Leave it

2-Minute Trainer #4

Impulse Control

Introduction

Dogs are truly amazing creatures. At some point in prehistory, they chose to join their lives to ours. And it's been a match made in heaven ever since.

We'll never know what motivated the first canines to become part of the human family, but we're certainly glad they did. When you think about it, it's absolutely amazing and wonderful that any animal is willing to do what we say, live by our rules, and spend their lives with us.

Dogs are our best friends among the animals. We've had a cat and we know - most cats interact on their own terms. They may be dearly loved, but, generally speaking, they're not the participants in family life that dogs can be. We know many people who have their dogs by their sides most of the time - both at home, at work, and out and about.

Becoming a member of the family

The key to getting your dog on board with being a polite member of society at large and your family in particular, is teaching him impulse control. Without it, dogs do whatever they like, whenever they like. If the dog has no impulse control and gets a whiff of something delightfully disgusting in the garbage, there's nothing to keep him from helping himself. With impulse control, he knows not to do it. Although, if the stink is gross enough, it's wise to get it out of the house anyway.

What's most fun?

There are all kinds of things that dogs can find rewarding:

- Jumping on guests
- Dumping over the trash
- Counter Surfing
- Lunging at other dogs
- Chasing squirrels
- Barking at other dogs
- Eating stuff off the ground
- Etc., etc., etc.

2-Minute Tip



The key is being more fun and more rewarding than the "impulse" item. It's not always easy to do. And until your dog is familiar with the impulse-control games, in order to make real headway you will have to control situations that trigger your dog's out-of-control behavior.

Dogs behave in the way they find most rewarding. That means **changing your dog's mindset** from "barking at the neighbor dog is the absolute best!" to "going to my mom to get a treat when I see the neighbor dog is the absolute best!" It's a layer of thinking that has to be taught. And rewarded consistently.

The neighbor dog scenario is one we've been dealing with ourselves. The dog hasn't changed, but our specific dynamic has. There's a Husky that lives, mostly outside, in our neighbor's yard. He's been there a long time and our dogs were accustomed to him. An occasional exchange of barks, but quickly quieted and no big deal. The situation changed when Fran got Simon, her 1-year-old Boston Terrier. Simon and Booker (her 7-year-old Boston) started playing together in the yard. Chasing, romping, with play-barks and growl-sounding vocalizations.

The Husky two doors down decided he didn't like that one little bit. After years of short, "you and what army" insults at each other, all of a sudden he was jumping up on the fence and objecting, in neighborhood-resounding yodeling, to our dogs playing in our yard. Fortunately, the Bostons were too busy having fun to care. Remember? Dogs do what's most rewarding for them. For Booker and Simon, the most rewarding thing is to play with each other, not trading insults with the Husky.

Torque, Hope's 5-year-old French Bulldog, on the other hand, wasn't involved in the play. And thought it was a fine, fun, and rewarding activity to send those insults right back where they came from. We'd rather he didn't, so formed a plan of action for getting Torque to choose not to bark at the neighbor dog.

Because Torque has been playing training games since the day he came home five years ago, he has a very high value for playing with us. Playing is fun, exciting, and gets him toys or treats and praise. All of which he loves. So Hope started by getting close to Torque as he was barking and getting his attention by saying his name - softly. We didn't want to add to the noise level. And, as all parents know, sometimes you get better attention by whispering than shouting.

So Hope just walked up to Torque, insinuating herself at an angle so he couldn't see the Husky. She said his name and, at the least glance in her direction, praised him and stuck a treat in his face. It took just a few sessions for Torque to figure out that looking at Hope got him a much better "paycheck" than barking at the other dog.

2-Minute Tip

You can modify any dog behavior by following the formula:



- What's triggering the behavior I don't like?
- What reward is my dog getting from performing this behavior?
- Can I change the circumstances around the behavior?
- What aspects of the trigger are within my control?

The last one was the trickiest to figure out in our example. We had no way of knowing when the Husky would be outside, and if he would react to our dogs. We don't usually have our dogs on collar/harness and leash in our own fenced yard, so the usual control factors were missing.

- What's most rewarding to my dog?
- How can I use that to change the behavior?

Dogs always do what they find most rewarding or satisfying. Torque now gives a perfunctory bark when he sees the Husky, then goes running to Hope for a treat. And yes, in a way, it is a "bribe" for good behavior. But it's our dogs' job to be good, and good job performance always gets paid!

Changing instinctive behavior

Because we're trying to change instinctive behavior, it will be a process that requires extraordinary patience, consistency, and some length of time. And not every dog will be capable of sustaining engagement with these games. Puppies, especially, have a limited capacity for focus and attention. Try the game, and if you get resistance, expressed by either shutting down or amping up, let it go. Next time cut the time in half. You may have to build up time to achieve much duration.

Both “successful” and “failed” 2-Minute Training sessions give us information we can use. Our dogs are constantly communicating with us - we just don't speak the same language. It's up to us to interpret what the dogs are telling us.

We have 2-Minute Sessions with each of our dogs every morning. We play different games each day, but our dogs do have their favorites. Fran's Brussels Griffon Tango, now 10 years old, loves the game “Put Your Toys Away.” She scatters a bunch of soft toys around, puts out a container (usually a dishpan). Tango grabs each one and puts it in the dishpan, usually squealing a little as each toy goes in the bin - he loves this game. One day, Tango didn't want to play. He was telling us something, but it took a while to figure out what it was. He has a bit of arthritis, and he was hurting that day. He didn't want to go back and forth, from the toy pile to the dishpan because it hurt.

On the other end of the spectrum, Simon is one, and a high-energy Boston Terrier. We're still working these impulse control games daily. The first one in particular - just like any baby, he doesn't realize when he's tired and needs to just relax and take a nap.

Impulse Control Game 1: Sit and Accept Praise

This was the very first dog training game we ever learned, and it's still a good one. It requires more physical control of the dog than most of our games. While most of our games involve teaching our dogs to “make good decisions,” this one is mostly for puppies who may not be capable of “choosing” to be calm.



Sit & accept praise

Calm down!

Puppies, like babies, don't always know when they're tired. Instead of nodding off, their behavior escalates and they get wilder and more out of control as they tire. When we see this happening, it's time for a game of “Sit and Accept Praise.”

There is no timer for this game - it's called to the plate **when you're relaxing and watching tv on your couch and need your puppy to just calm down.**

With the puppy wearing his collar or harness, tuck him into your side, with two fingers holding the collar or harness. The puppy may resist, but just be firm, calm, and tuck him/her in with your elbow. Speak calmly to the puppy, in a sing-song or monotone voice. As boring as

you can possibly make it. With your other hand, gently pet the puppy under the jaw (may induce yawning) or around the ears.



2-Minute Tip

Just a note: non-dog people tend to pet the tops of dogs' heads. Most dogs don't like it. Anything coming over their heads can be seen as threatening, or frightening. If it's a favorite way for you to pet your dog, introduce it gradually, start under the jaw or around the ears, and work your way up to the top of the head. Coming **from**

the side is a better option.

When the puppy relaxes, ease up on the elbow clamping and see if the puppy is ready to take a nap next to you. If he/she is raring to go, just reset and start again.

If it's been a while since you've had a puppy, you'll be remembering at this point what a lot of work they are. But it's worth it. **The more effort you expend teaching your puppy in the beginning, the sooner you'll have the amazing, well-behaved companion you've dreamed of.**

If you have a super-active puppy (or dog), you can use this game whenever you need it. We know there may be lots of things you'd rather be doing than giving your undivided attention to your dog. Especially after a long day when you just want to relax. This is one of those "investment" training games. **The more time you spend on it now, the less you'll have to do in the future. Your dog will come to understand when it's time to relax and unwind.**

Impulse Control Game #2: Whatcha Gonna Do? (WGD)

Whatcha Gonna Do is the **foundation game for dog decision-making!** Try to get in at least one 2-Minute session every day, until you and your dog have mastered the game. After that, you'll still want to play it often - it's your dog's chance to be "creative" and it's a fundamental, and fun, go-to game for dogs at any stage of training.

First off, know that it's possible your hands will suffer during this one at first. It depends on how determined your dog is to dig for treats. We apologize, but know that your short-term suffering will be handsomely rewarded in the long term.

Equipment:

- Treats
- Timer
- Patience

Procedure: (Series of pictures in a couple of pages...)

Start your 2-Minute timer.

Grab a few treats in your fist and sit on the floor.

Hold your fist out so your dog knows there are treats in there. Keep your hand at or below the level of your dog's mouth.

When your dog does anything, **ANYTHING**, other than bother the "treat hand," use your other hand to take one of the treats and give it to your dog. And tell her she's a good dog!

That's all there is to this game, at the start.

Keys to Whatcha Gonna Do?

- Be patient. It may take more than one session for your dog to get the idea that pawing, whining, nibbling on your hand, aren't the behaviors that will be rewarded.
- You don't have to sit on the floor, a chair will do. Just be sure that the "treat fist" stays at or below the level of the dog's mouth.
- **Keep that hand in place.** Pulling it up will encourage your dog to jump after it - the exact opposite of your goal.
- **You be quiet!** Don't say "uh-uh," or "stop," or "sit," or "back up," or anything. This is your dog's opportunity to show you what's in his repertoire. When he "gets" the game, it becomes the basis for all the "free-style" tricks you'll play together in the future. The only exception: if your dog really is hurting your hand, you're allowed to squeal "ouch!"

Use the hand **without the treats in it to deliver treats** to your dog. That retains the picture - the hand holding the treats doesn't deliver the treats. That hand doesn't move. It doesn't matter which hand is used for which "job," - you can even switch off between them. (Pictures of the WGD game progression in a page or two.)

So your first WGD session was a bust. Your dog just pawed at your hand, or gnawed at you, for two whole minutes. **That's okay.** Remember that dogs process information over time. Tomorrow, when you play the game again, his behavior may be entirely different. He's had time to think about what didn't work. And the notion may occur to him to try something else. Anything else.

The next session she may look at your hand and **back up a step. Reward! Or sit (reward). Or lie down (reward). You'll be looking for any behavior that is not bothering your treat hand.** Reward anything that's different, assuming that it's a step in the right direction. If your dog does something pushier, or more obnoxious, like jumping on you or crawling into your lap, just ignore it.



2-Minute Tip

The hardest part of this game is keeping calm and patient. It's difficult, but so worthwhile. Most dogs will catch on quickly. They do what's most rewarding. If what they're doing isn't getting rewarded, they'll try something else pretty soon.

Progression of the Game:

Once your dog does something else consistently when he sees your treat-filled fist, it's time to "up the ante." Try opening the treat hand, palm up, of course. If your dog makes a move towards it, **just close your fist.**

The next step is being able to leave your hand open, with treats exposed, and your dog "offering" different behaviors to get a treat. Our dogs have come up with lots of different things: sitting, backing up, lying down, bowing, rocking back and forth on their front feet, nodding, spinning, etc.



Whatcha gonna do? 1

Fran is holding treats in her fist.
Simon is trying to get to them.
Notice that Fran's hand is below
Simon's head.



Whatcha gonna do 2

Simon has backed off. He's no
longer trying to get at the
treats in Fran's hand.



Whatcha gonna do 3

Simon has backed off. Fran
opened her hand so that Simon
can see the treats, and she's going
to give him one with her other
hand.



Whatcha gonna do 4

Advanced level. Simon is
relaxed even when 5 treats
are on the floor in front of
him.

When you see a behavior that's particularly adorable - reward heavily. Remember that dogs do what's rewarding, so you'll probably see that behavior again. When you do, name it and reward it. Say "good bow!" And ask them to do it again.

Dogs have a pretty amazing capability of learning our words. Which is a good thing, since we haven't been able to figure out theirs! If you see something you like, you can call it whatever you want and you and your dog can make it a permanent part of your repertoire. Dogs especially enjoy it when we smile and laugh, so your delight with your dog will almost guarantee a repeat of the action that sparked it in the first place.

The eventual goal of WGD is being able to leave an entire handful, or bowlful, of treats out in the open, accessible. And your dog choosing to ignore it. **Because playing with you is more rewarding than stealing treats and getting in trouble.**

With WGD you can also introduce “**props**” to see what your dog will do with them. We’ve used little step-stools, foam rollers, cardboard tubes, anything. It keeps the game fresh, keeps your dog’s brain engaged, and increases the delight factor for both of you.

Impulse Control Game #3: Pick Me!

Pick me! is a game you can use wherever you are, whatever you’re doing. Once your dog is proficient, you can even **use it to help your dog channel her energy and regain focus wherever you are.**

2-Minute Tip



We have to keep in mind that dogs don’t really understand our world - they trust us to keep them safe, be their interpreters and help them navigate in our world. When our dogs don’t know what’s going on, they can become stressed and act inappropriately. If you have a “safe” behavior you ask for, your dog knows what to do and it gives them a solid base to work from.

Stuff you need:

- Timer
- Clicker
- Treats
- Dog

Your position doesn’t matter; you can stand, sit, kneel, sit in a chair. Whatever’s comfortable for you. You will be changing your position when your dog starts to understand the game, so you can play wherever you are.



Pick me!

Regain focus

All we’re asking your dog to do in this game is **touch her nose to your hand.**

Put your palm out facing your dog, at the level of your dog’s face. When he sniffs your hand, click and reward. Use the other hand to **deliver the treat in the center of your open palm.**

Repeat as often as you can for two minutes. All we want the dog to do is touch your hand with his nose. Don’t reward if your dog uses his paws - that’s a different behavior. Most dogs will “get” the game in just one session. As long as you’re in the same place, in the same position, holding out the same hand. Pick a word for the behavior - most people just say “Touch!” but you can use whatever you like. Keep it short and make your word something you can remember in a stressful situation.

In subsequent sessions - change it up. Stand instead of sit. Move in a circle. Play in a different room. Can your dog “chase” a moving hand? Can he “touch” outside? At the pet store? In the vet’s office? When the doorbell rings? When the mail carrier is delivering packages? When the pizza guy is at the door?

2-Minute Tip



The whole idea of this game is to **add value to you**. Touching your hand is a great way to get your dog to focus on you. By changing position and having your dog follow your hand, you also give yourself a chance to move your dog away from anything that he might negatively react to. Just having her turn around, away from the trigger “thing,” gives you a chance to reward good behavior and avoid the negative.

Impulse Control Game #4: Ditch the bowl

All positive reinforcement dog training is based on a deal we make with our dogs: **You get what you want when I get what I want.** It’s a fair trade. Everybody’s happy!



Ditch the bowl:

Growing the bond

For most dogs, what they want **second most in the world (first is you!) is food**. We know there are some dogs that are finicky, but we’ve never had one. We thought we did once, but he just didn’t like the food he came with. As soon as we switched to something he liked better, he became just as much a “chow hound” as our other dogs.

We use that love of food to strengthen our bond with our dogs and to really help them understand our “deal.”

This game may take more than two minutes, but it doesn’t add much time to your day, since you play at your dog’s meal time.

For one meal a day, feed your dog from your hand instead of a bowl. **And ask for a behavior for every bit of food.**

Those of us who feed canned, raw, or home-made food will have a messier time of this than those who feed kibble. We’re not going to get into a debate about dog food here - whatever you’ve been feeding your dog, use that.

When Tango came into our lives, Hope couldn’t touch him. He was a nasty little bugger who hated everyone but Fran. Since we sisters share a house, this couldn’t continue.

For six weeks, every meal, Hope hand-fed Tango. At the end of that time, they weren’t in love, but they could share space peaceably. It took much longer for Fran to transform him into the happy, lovely, friendly dog he became, but the start was hand-feeding.

Because we couldn’t trust Tango at all, Hope sat at the entrance to his crate and opened the door to feed him. If your dog guards his food, we recommend you do the same. We would also suggest, **with resource-guarding dogs, to place the food on the floor**, rather than in your hand. Safety is paramount and there is no resource most dogs value more highly than food.

Prepare your dog's food as normal, but keep the bowl under your control. For small dogs, sit on the floor and keep it under your legs. For larger dogs, or people who have trouble sitting on the floor, sit in a chair and keep the bowl close at hand.

Grab a couple pieces of food (or a small chunk), and **ask your dog to do something**. You may get some resistance - your dog doesn't know what's going on. Ignore any whining, pawing, or other behavior. **As soon as you get what you asked for (sit, down, spin, shake, etc.), give the dog the food.**

Do it again. And again, until the bowl is empty.

2-Minute Tip

We know this isn't the most convenient game, which is why we're not saying you have to do it for every meal. It is one of the most valuable for cementing a good relationship with your dog - it emphasizes that every good thing in life comes from you.



It also lets your dog truly understand that **he or she can trust you**. You will deliver on your promises, every single time. When you get what you want, he'll get what he wants. Always.

Impulse Control Game #5: Take it/Leave it

Our very first dog-training instructor had a "graduation" ceremony for dogs. It was the ultimate "Leave it" situation. On his way to class, he would pick up a few servings of McDonald's French Fries. The aroma permeated the entire room - making both humans and dogs salivate.

Then he would scatter them all over the floor. Our task was to cross the entire room, keeping our dog's attention the entire way. And, with the practice we'd had during the class, every single dog could do it. Yours will be able to, too!

For Take it/Leave it you'll need:

Timer

Treats

Sit in a chair or on the floor with your dog on collar or harness and leash. Sit on the leash so your dog can't get too far away.

Grab a small handful of treats in one hand. Your non-dominant hand is recommended, since you'll be handling individual the treats with the other hand.

Hold the hand with the treats at the dog's eye level or below.

Take one treat with the other hand, and give it to your dog while you say "Take it." Give the treat to the dog. **Do it a bunch of times. Take it, take it, take it, giving your dog a treat for each time you say it.** We're expanding our dog's vocabulary, teaching her what "Take" means. It means she gets the treat/reward/toy every time you say take it.

Now take another treat and close your hand around it. (Both hands can be closed for this.) Say "Leave it." And wait for your dog to look away, back away, sit - anything other than bother the hands holding the treats. **We're teaching our dogs to choose to be "good," to make the right choice. We're also teaching what "Leave it" means.**

As soon as your dog chooses to actually "leave it" - hand her the treat and say "take it." **It's important to repeat the word every time you give a treat during this game.**

Training note: Don't worry about being perfect. Nobody is. Sometimes we all say the wrong word, do things in the wrong order, or forget a step. It's no big deal. It may cause some momentary confusion for the dog, and you may have to get it "right" a few more times, but dogs are sufficiently adaptable to cope with our mistakes. No one will know but you and your dog - and your dog will never tell anyone you messed up.

When it happens, and it will, **don't groan or make a sound that signals "wrong."** Your dog won't know you're frustrated with yourself and not with her. Just give her an "oopsie" cookie and start over. It's not that big a deal and it's better for dogs to get "extra" rewards than not enough.

When you think your dog is starting to understand "take it" and "leave it," it's time to **add some challenges**. Put the treats in a bowl on the floor and walk by it with your dog. This part is best done on leash. Don't give your dog enough slack to actually reach the bowl. As your dog glances at the bowl, say "leave it." When he looks at you, rather than at the bowl, say "take it" and give him a treat. As your dog is successful at ignoring that tempting bowl, you can get closer to it, or give him enough slack so reaching it is possible.

When you've mastered the bowl, leave the treats on the floor. And add further challenges by playing Take it/Leave it in other locations - even outside. You'll know your dog is ready for the next level of challenge when he achieves success about 75% of the time. If you go too far too fast, both of you will get frustrated. If you attempt a next level and it's too much for your dog, think about how you can modify it to take a step back. **Like all learning, there are ups and downs, progress isn't a steady curve, it's a mountain range.**



2-Minute Tip

Celebrate every success! Remember you're playing games with your dog. There's no difference, to your dog, between a rousing game of fetch and a rousing game of Take it/Leave it. Be loud! Be enthused! Be happy! Your dog should start wagging his tail whenever you reach for your timer.

Some of these games are more active, involved, and lend themselves to a higher excitement level. For other games, it's up to you to provide the emotion. **The ultimate objective is for your dog to choose good behavior in every single situation presented.** Life isn't always calm and quiet. It's often loud and chaotic and you're giving your dog the tools to cope in every circumstance.