

Teaching your dog to Relax on a Mat

Teaching your dog to relax on a mat is a great way to build independence and impulse control. You can also take the mat with you when you visit family or friends or go to a more stressful place like the veterinarian office. Mat training should be part of every obedience plan and can be very useful for helping jumpy/mouthy dogs to relax and dogs with separation anxiety to gain more confidence.

Start out in a quiet room with no distractions. You will need a mat such as kitchen rug, yoga mat or crate pad and some small treats that your dog loves (small pieces of cut up cheese, chicken or hot dogs work well). It is also helpful to have a pouch or large pocket to keep the treats in for easy access. Set up a chair next to the mat for you to sit in while you train (you'll need to relax, too). Keep your first few sessions short, no longer than 3- 5 minutes.



Step 1

Scatter a few treats on the mat and then bring your dog over to sniff. Ignore your dog while it is eating the treats and sit down on the chair.

Step 2

As soon as your dog finishes the treats and before it leaves the mat, drop a few more treats on the mat between your dog's front feet.

Step 3

Do not pet or talk to your dog and do not allow it to leave the mat. Watch for any signs of relaxation such as sitting, lying down or

yawning and immediately drop another few treats between your dog's front legs. If your dog does not lie down, you can lure it into the down position and reinforce by dropping your treats between its front legs.

Step 4

If your dog continues to relax by either sitting or lying down, lessen the number of treats and deliver them at 10 second intervals. If your dog gets up, stop your treat delivery until your dog resumes the relaxation position of either sit or down. End your session while your dog is still engaged and having fun. Pick up your mat to signal the end of the session.

Step 5

Start your next session in the same manner. Ideally, your dog will want to lay down and you can start to increase the time your dog relaxes on the mat while you extend the interval time of your treat deliveries to every 20 seconds and then, every 30 seconds. At this point, you can also give your dog a long lasting treat such as a Kong stuffed with peanut butter or a bully stick.

Step 6

Your goal is for your dog to master the steps above and increase the relaxation time to 20-30 minutes. At this point you are ready to add distance between you and your dog, increasing your dog's independence. Follow the steps below:

1. Tether a food stuffed Kong toy to a sturdy piece of furniture and place your dog's mat next to the toy.
2. Place your chair a few feet from the mat and sit down.
3. Allow your dog to go to the toy and enjoy it while lying on the mat.
4. With each training session, gradually increase your distance away from the mat until you are able to get up and leave the room for a few seconds while your dog stays relaxed on the mat.

Step 7

You can now try to generalize the mat training by taking the mat to another quiet room. It may be necessary to repeat some of the first steps but soon your dog will be able to relax in a different spot.

Step 8

Next, you can try to add some light distraction such as dropping an object, standing up and sitting back down, moving around the room, or having a familiar person enter the space.

Additionally, you can teach your dog to go to the mat using a clicker. ***See Clicker Training Protocol for instructions.** This will teach you how to put the behavior on cue and also how to send your dog to the mat from a distance. Once accomplished, these exercises will help you enjoy the calm side of your dog while you both chill out!