



It'sYerChoice: The game of self control

by Susan
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The It'sYerChoice game teaches dogs to have self control in the face of tough distractions. The dog learns how to make correct choices for himself, eliminating the need for you to constantly manage his behavior. Last issue, I explained how to play the It'sYerChoice game. This issue, we'll make the game more challenging.

new self control to all environments. At first your dog may resort to his old ways, trying to steal the cookies. Once again, say and do nothing and wait until he moves away from your hand. When he does, lift up your hand and re-start the process with him described in part one until he shows enough self control that you can praise him, pick

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Advancing the choices

Eventually you can get out of your chair and put all the cookies in a pile on the floor. This changes the learning environment for the dog but success in this location will help the dog to generalize his

up a cookie and feed him without him moving forward.

Once your dog is excelling with this game, test him further by using higher value food rewards. The higher the value of the treats, the more of a distraction they will present, and thus the more challenge to your dog's self control. Try food he loves or food he has never had. This is a great “TV” game. You can lounge on the floor and work towards putting a cookie on your dog's paw or on both paws or the top of his head! He must ignore the cookie in order to earn the cookie. When you are ready, tap your finger in front of the cookie and tell him to “get it.” Be light hearted and it will be fun for both of you.

You can also try this game during formal training. Have your dog in a sit, praise him and walk towards him to feed him. Does he break position to help “facilitate” your feeding him? If so, step back and start again. Just because you were going to reward him does not give him permission to stop his work or to jump on you. Try the game with him holding a contact position in agility. Does he move his paws or try to come out of position when you feed him? If so, close your fist around the cookie and move away to try again. It is about self control in all environments and the game remains the same. You control the consequences, not the dog.

The advanced stage of It'sYerChoice with food involves food on the floor and the dog





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moving. Allow your dog to watch you drop a treat on the floor. If he dives at it you can step on the cookie to control his access to it. (Covering or picking up the cookie is controlling the consequences of your dog's poor choice.) A head halter and leash are the best tools to use when playing this stage of the game as you have easy control over the dog's ability to steal rewards. You want to be able to 'plant' food on the floor and walk the dog by it.

I like to build It'sYerChoice into a round of Crate Games. (Learn more about Crate Games, in my soon to be released DVD of the same name.) I will put a low-value cookie on the floor with the dog in the crate and the door open. My goal is to call the dog out and have him ignore the cookie and come to me. A good choice will be rewarded with a much higher value cookie from my hand followed by the dog being sent back to get the cookie left on the floor in front of the crate.

When I am cooking in the kitchen and a tidbit falls from the cutting board to the floor, I expect that none of my four dogs will try to steal it. Any dog that does is given a time out (and never beats me to the carrot anyway). The dogs that do not try to steal the carrot will all be rewarded for a great choice. This keeps peace as everyone understands the rules of It'sYerChoice and I never have two female Jack Russell Terriers going for the same piece of food that has fallen to the floor!

It'sYerToyChoice

For the toy-driven dog, you can now play It'sYerChoice with a toy. Get your training bag and unzip the zipper. What is your dog's response? Does he try to dive inside to steal his toys? If so, just zip the zipper back up and wait. You may need to zip and unzip the zipper several times before he realizes this is the same self-control gig he did with his cookies. Work towards picking up the toy, praising him and then telling him to "get it". Now

walk around with the toy in your hand. Any attempt by the dog to steal the toy, without being invited, is a poor choice and the chance for reinforcement will end. Stop walking, take the dog by his collar and hold him against your leg until he drops the toy. You are controlling the consequences and not allowing him to play. Now keep walking with the toy dangling in sight. Do not pull the toy out of the dog's reach as you would be eliminating any choice for him and any opportunity to learn the appropriate way to respond.

It'sYerChoice should be the foundation of all of your distraction work. Build the game slowly, starting with lower value distractions and working your way up to the tougher ones. Once you have worked through food and toys, try favourite people or moving dogs. The game is the same for rewards like playing in the hose or going for a swim, just as it is for certain favorite pieces of agility equipment. The dog should not leave you at any time to seek his own rewards.

Build upon success but be able to control access to that which reinforces your dog so you don't find yourself in a situation where you blurt out an inadvertent "leave-it!" A dog that has been trained this way is a joy to work. You do not need to worry about him seeing something or someone he may want, as he has been taught to make the correct choice on his own and he has complete control over his own impulses regardless of the challenges you present to him. **DS**

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