



Chill Out! Teaching your Dog to Settle

In our classes, we teach several ways to handle our dogs in exciting or challenging situations. We use redirection and obedience to achieve self-control. For example, we ask the dog to focus on us (eye contact) instead of barking at another dog. Or, we ask them to sit in order to greet someone, instead of jumping up. Or, we ask them to heel with us through a distracting environment. In other words, these methods involve US DIRECTING the dog to replace more excited behaviors with ones that we desire.

While having these strategies is important, what is equally important is having a dog who has learned how to settle down and move into a more relaxed, calm state ON HER/HIS OWN. Over time, this creates a dog who knows how to relax without you telling it to and curl up and relax on its own.



Cora and Mya settle under my desk while I put a little time in at the office.

HOW TO DO IT:

GOAL: Encourage self-settling and calming through handler observation and quiet verbal reinforcement.

- Put your dog on leash. Get your dog a little excited by moving around and making funny voices—just for a few seconds.
- Sit down in a chair and hold your dog's leash. DO NOT ask them to sit, down, or stay or anything like that.
- You are now observer and coach. Observe your dog...EVERY time your dog shows ANY (even the slightest) sign of becoming relaxed/calm/moving from energetic excited state to more quite state, reinforce this by quietly saying "good dog". Do not use food and don't touch your dog—in an exercise like this, these are distracting. Also, don't have toys nearby (this isn't a play session!). **See below for a list of common dog body signals that mean your dog is calming down.**
- As you wait, your dog should become increasingly settled. There may be moments when your dog moves to a more excited state (gets up, looks around, maybe barks), just keep noticing any signs of relaxation and quietly praising them.

TIPS:

- Don't worry if your dog doesn't achieve a total relaxed state (practically asleep on the floor and totally mellow) the first few times. This takes practice over time. Some dogs pick it up more quickly than others!
- Try to end the exercise (you getting up and letting your dog go) when your dog has just relaxed a bit (not when they have moved into a more excited state).
- If your dog seems confused, don't worry—just stay quiet other than when you are praising for signs of calm/settling.
- If your dog paws at you, barks, or climbs on you, ignore it, turn away in your chair, and ignore the behavior. Verbally praise when they stop doing these things (verbal praise should always be calm and quiet so you don't energize your dog!).



GOLD STAR Dog Training

- When you are first trying this with your dog, do it when your dog is already tired out, and in a quiet, distraction-free place.
- If you can do this exercise every day, even for 5-10 minutes, you will see response more quickly.

NEXT STEPS AND NEW CHALLENGES:

Once your dog automatically seems to settle down when you sit:

- Try doing the exercise in new places and more distracting places. Just remember your dog may take longer to settle in these new circumstances since we're adding difficulty to the exercise.
- Introduce a cue (it can be as simple as "Settle" as your dog starts to settle. In this way, we're pairing a word with the calm state and you can ask your dog to do it on cue.

SIGNALS THAT YOUR DOG IS SETTLING DOWN

Look for these common signs that your dog is settling and moving into a calmer state:

- Changing position from standing to sitting (and settling on one hip), sitting to lying down; flopping over on his or her side
- Yawning
- Shaking off
- Sighing or releasing a deep breath
- Becoming quiet (ceasing barking or whining)
- Breathing becoming slower
- Alert eyes changing to quiet calm eyes
- Circling as if to find a place to sit or lie down
- Stretching



Cora settles while I do a little shopping.



Here are a few videos that show how the technique works:

- My two German Shepherds settling in my office: [CLICK HERE](#)
- One of my Shepherds settling in a busy environment—the pet wash at a local pet store: [CLICK HERE](#)
- Using the settle with a young Tervuren at a restaurant: [CLICK HERE](#)