



## The “Check it Out” Game

Teaching your dog to touch/approach objects on request is an incredibly useful tool for introducing your dog to new experiences and objects; it creates a dog that is excited about exploring, and interacting with, his/her world.

If a dog shows initial apprehension about an object, asking him or her to explore it can overcome/prevent fear from building. Having a command/cue that asks your dog to explore can become a powerful tool when socializing your dog to new experiences. The more your dog does it, the better he gets—and learns the world is a really fun and safe place to check out! The beauty of this tool is that it not only provides a productive way to deal with a particular object or experience (such as an umbrella, a vacuum, etc.), but it also builds your dog’s confidence over time!

As dogs experience the many things, sounds, sensations, and experiences that make up our world, they are forming impressions about this world. When these impressions/experiences are good (have positive outcomes), dogs gain:

- Self-confidence and confidence in you,
- Mental resiliency,
- Curiosity about the world and willingness to learn, and
- Ability to cope better with new experiences.

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**WHAT IS IT:** Asking your dog to touch your finger with his/her nose and then transfer this skill to touching other objects. It first starts with touching your finger reliably, then touching FUN things (things your dog would want to touch on its own), and then touching things that your dog is worried about (go slow—move to each step only after your dog has practice and is good at each step).

**WHY DO IT:** Dogs understand our world by interacting with it, by sniffing, licking, and nosing all the neat new things the world has to offer. If a dog shows apprehension about an object or new experience, asking him/her to explore it can overcome/prevent fear from building. Thus, having a cue that asks your dog to explore can become a powerful tool when socializing to new experiences. The more your dog does it, the better s/he gets—and learns the world is a really fun and safe place to explore! Many dogs (especially puppies) are curious by nature and exploring is not much of a stretch (even if it was a little scary at first)—use this to your advantage!

### HOW TO TEACH IT:

**Step 1:** Give the cue (i.e. touch, check it out) while positioning your finger slightly below and about 6 inches from your dog’s nose, wait for him/her to touch her nose to your finger, mark<sup>1</sup> the instant s/he does so, then reward.

**Step 2:** When your dog is easily and readily touching your finger, then touch your finger to an object, give the (“touch”), wait for your dog to follow your finger with his or her nose to touch the object, mark as soon as s/he does so, and then reward.

When you are doing this exercise, you are:

1. Carefully observing your dog’s body language as s/he encounters an object;

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<sup>1</sup> In our classes and workshops, we use marker training to help the dog understand what we are asking him or her to do when we give a cue. If you aren’t using marker training, you can achieve the same result by praising your dog verbally the instant he or she performs the behavior you want, and then give a food treat.



2. Assessing how your dog is feeling about the object: curious, engaged, worried, unsure, fearful, etc.; and
3. Asking your dog to touch the object, marking and rewarding, when s/he does.



- **Teaching the game to 9 week-old puppy Cedar** (~10 min): Click [here](#)
- **Teaching the game to 8 year-old Mya** (~6 min): Click [here](#)

## USING YOUR NEW SKILL (IMPORTANT!)

Use your new game to introduce your dog/puppy to new things! By this step, your dog/puppy has already learned to approach/touch new objects that s/he has no problem with and would touch anyway. This should be a fun game! Now, you are going to ask your dog/puppy to approach things that may be mildly worrisome. When s/he does so, you will offer lots of praise and a food reward! You also want to continue playing the game with fun stuff your dog has no worries about—so that your dog doesn't associate the game only with stressful encounters.

### **Golden Rules for Using This Approach Responsibly and Safely**

- **Dog always decides.** NEVER force a dog to approach (or remain in/near) a situation or object—the DOG ALWAYS DECIDES whether or not to engage!
- **Choose wisely.** If there is any chance of pain, injury, or a fright, do not use the touch technique (you will teach your dog not to trust the approach, and possibility not trust you). For example, if you walk across a rug to ask your dog to touch something and he gets an electric shock from your finger, he may think “I'm not doing that touch thing again!” Likewise, never ask your dog to touch other dogs or people for the same reason—you may not be able to assure a positive outcome.
- **Go slow and don't overdo.** Slow, gentle exposure to new things helps you create the best possible outcomes and positive experience for your dog.
- **Always monitor your dog's experience and adjust.** Is s/he having fun? Is he really stressed? Fearful? Pushing your dog risks making him/her more fearful.

### **What if My Dog Won't Approach/Touch the Object?**

Your dog may be too afraid to touch/approach a given object—that's okay!! Things to try if your dog won't approach/touch the object:

- **Move away.** Move to a distance where your dog is less stressed. Praise anytime your dog looks at the object without fear or stress, wags his tail when looking at the object, seems curious about it, or takes a step toward it.
- **Reduce intensity.** Reduce the intensity to a point where the dog has no reaction to the stressor (for example, a vacuum cleaner turned off, an umbrella closed).
- **Play:** Make a positive association with the object by playing near/around it.
- **Movement:** Introducing movement can prevent your dog from standing rooted and fear, with intensity building. Walk around or past the object at a distance your dog is comfortable. S/he might just start to move toward it on his/her own.

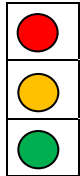


# GOLD STAR Dog Training

- **Treat trail:** Place a string of treats to the object and/or on the object.
- **Call in a canine friend:** Use a more experienced, calm dog (that your dog likes) to approach the target and see if your dog will be encouraged to also approach.

## ***How to assess if your dog is okay with a given experience or interaction***

Read your dog's body language. Look for stress, fear, avoidance, fatigue. Adjust accordingly.



Your dog is clearly uncomfortable—stop and remove your dog from the situation.

Your dog is starting to show minor signs of being uncomfortable or you're not sure what your dog is thinking: Proceed with caution and only if your dog's stress signals start to go away.

Your dog is clearly enjoying the experience—keep going!

Flip through my 16-page *Dog Communication Primer* photobook for a crash course in reading dog body language: Click [here](#).

If you're pup or dog is really fearful or you feel his/her reactions are worsening, don't expose him/her to that object or experience without professional help.

## **NOTES and TIPS**

- Build a strong response to the cue before using it on items your dog is unsure of—use it on fun and pleasant things for a while; this gains trust and strengthens the technique before you try to apply it to something your dog may find concerning. Make it a fun game—touch this, touch that, get treats and praise!
- Even as you use the tool on things your dog may be worried about or afraid of, continue to always play the touch it game on fun stuff too! This is important so your dog doesn't start to associate "touch" with ONLY worrisome things.
- Use high-value treats (you can even save a special treat just for your socialization activities).
- Learn more:
  - o Read my article, "Understanding and Handling Your Dog's Fear—and Building Confidence in Any Dog" (in the library at [www.goldstardog.com](http://www.goldstardog.com))