

TRAINING FOR ATTENTION IN THE AGILITY RING

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The concept of "attention," I believe, first came on the scene in obedience training in this country sometime in the late 70's to early 80's. As if over night, the phrase "Watch Me" was suddenly being chanted coast to coast in dog training classes everywhere. Heeling started to take on a new look. Dogs pranced next to their handlers with heads high looking alert as they paid attention to the body cues that would tell them what direction their handlers were taking. There are now many "attention exercises" and even special training classes devoted to teaching "how to get your dogs attention."

In order to teach anything you must first have the attention of your student. For the student to be able to perform what you have taught, the student's mental state of mind must be one of focus and concentration. There is no doubt that dogs that are attentive to their handlers score higher in obedience and make fewer mistakes in agility. What you may not realize is that the type of attention needed for training obedience is very different from the kind of attention desired in the agility ring.

In obedience, attention is usually thought of as a dog that is looking at his handler, not necessarily at the handler's face. Dogs taught to heel looking at the handler's face are often wrapped around the handler's left leg in a forged position. Or, the handler is wrapped around, staring at the dog in an unnatural position. Often, these dogs cannot walk parallel to their handler and are said to be "side-winding" as they try to maintain eye-to-eye contact in a position that forces the dog's body totally off balance. In contrast, dogs taught to heel looking up at the left side of the handler's body can pay attention and maintain their balance as they heel in a more correct position.

In agility, there are really only a few seconds on a course (areas of confusion) where the handler actually needs his dog looking at him! Dogs in agility that have repeatedly been taught to look at their handlers often spin, jump around in circles, and do not work at distance. It is very difficult to send these dogs ahead to obstacles. The key to attention training in the agility ring is that the dog must be taught to look ahead to the obstacles while knowing where his handler is and what he is being instructed to do next. To accomplish this, the dog uses peripheral vision, his excellent hearing and even his scenting ability. Attention is really about a state of mind and NOT a head position.

Have you witnessed the dog in the obedience Utility ring that stands with his head facing directly toward his handler on the Signal Exercise? And then, when the handler gives a signal, nothing happens. While the dog's head is positioned correctly pointing at the handler, where is his mind? Is he paying attention or just assuming a learned head position?

In my system of training agility (outlined in the newly released book *Agility Start to Finish Alpine 2008*), the dog is taught the command, "Here." That means: move towards me, line up with my body on the side closest to you, and look ahead to the next obstacle that I send you to. The dog should not be looking at my face; but rather positioning himself next to my body. If I need my dog to look directly at me, I use only the dog's name, which means, "Look at me. It's not what you think it is!" This allows me to pull the dogs eyes off of the wrong obstacle he may be starting to focus on and redirect him appropriately.

Beginning handlers, in an effort to get their dogs to work with them, do too much "look at me" attention training. Calling a dog, looking directly at his face and feeding him treats from your hand are very good ways to encourage a dog to look directly at you. Calling the dog to you after each obstacle interrupts the flow of motion you should be trying to create. Is this really what you want in agility? Handler focus is not about the dog's head position, it is really about his state of mind.

Training techniques such as targeting or the use of food tubes and other motivators that are thrown ahead of the dogs' path, will teach dogs to continue moving forward. Training a dog to "send" ahead of the handler and move laterally out away from the handler are other ways we instruct dogs to look ahead while maintaining awareness of their handler in the agility ring. A dog that is running towards a reward after having responded correctly to his handler's signal is definitely paying attention to the task at hand. He is just not looking at his partner.

When you set out to train for attention in agility, be careful what you ask for...you might just get it!