

One of the Most Important Commands to Teach Your Dog

In certain situations, you'll definitely want your dog to obey this command instantly. Fortunately, it's easy to learn when taught the right way. Here are the 6 steps to reliably and quickly get him to respond to the command. Especially if you remember these 3 key words.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- A study confirms what many professional dog trainers recommend when teaching your dog something new
- Dogs respond more quickly to pointing gestures and other hand signals alone than to verbal commands alone
- However, they respond most reliably when both a verbal cue and hand signal are used together
- For most dogs, the "drop it" command is easy to learn when taught the right way, which is to present your pet with a trade
- Training should be an enjoyable experience for both you and your dog. The key is to make your dog want to do the behavior rather than forcing him to do it

Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published March 26, 2018.

While the form of communication most of us humans use is verbal, our nonverbal dogs communicate with body language. That's why we sometimes use both words and gestures when we ask our canine companion to do something, often after we've tried words alone, or gestures alone.

Example: You're playing fetch with your dog. She's standing in front of you with the ball in her mouth and you say, "Drop it." If she hasn't learned what those words mean (more about this shortly), or if she's just so crazy about her ball that she can't bear to put it down, she won't drop it.

So you bend over or squat down and tap the ground, gesturing to her to drop the ball. Still nothing. So you tap the ground and say, "Drop it," and like magic, she drops the ball. Clearly, something about your gesture coupled with your words did the trick.

Most professional dog trainers recommend using this "bimodal" form of communication because they know from experience it works. However, we don't really know which cues — words or gestures — dogs prioritize when we're communicating with them "bimodally." Fortunately, a study published by university researchers in Italy sheds some light on the subject.¹

Dogs Prefer Gestures Over Verbal Commands, but Respond Most Reliably When Both Are Used

For the study, 13 dogs (six males, seven females) with no previous training, and their owners, were recruited from a dog training center in Italy. First, the researchers attempted to train all 13 to retrieve three different items when prompted by both a verbal cue and a pointing cue. The dogs who learned to retrieve the objects reliably with both types of cues (four males, five females) proceeded to the next phase of the study, which consisted of 32 trials.

Two objects were placed about 6 feet apart across a room, and the dogs were given verbal commands alone, gestures alone (the owners pointed to the object), and both verbal and gesture commands. In the final eight trials, both commands were given, but they conflicted. For example, an owner would give the verbal command “ball,” but would point not at the ball, but at another object. The researchers theorized that the more effective command would be the one the dog responded to.

The researchers observed that in the bimodal situation in which both a verbal cue and pointing gesture were used, the dogs responded the fastest. However, in the trials in which the verbal command and pointing gesture conflicted, 7 of the 9 dogs consistently followed the pointing cue versus the verbal cue.

The remaining two dogs responded somewhat randomly, but none of the dogs showed a significant preference for the verbal command over the pointing gesture. The researchers concluded that dogs prioritize gestures over verbal cues, but the use of both cues at the same time results in a significantly quicker and more reliable response.

Dr. Biagio D’Aniello pointed out that dogs are naturally masterful at reading body language, but not necessarily great at interpreting verbal speech, which explains why they’re innately much better at interpreting gestures.

Interestingly, he also said that guide dogs for the blind don’t understand gestures as well as other dogs because their owners don’t use them, which was fascinating to me.

Think of Your Dog as a Furry Toddler

According to Dr. Stanley Coren, author of “The Intelligence of Dogs,” these study results support the notion that dogs seem to have mental abilities on a par with human toddlers:

“You can confirm this for yourself, if you have access to a child around 3 years old,” Coren writes. “Simply get two objects — say, a red ball and a green ball — and place them on one side of the room separated by around six feet. Then point to the green ball, and say, ‘Get the red ball.’

Previous research suggests that under these conditions, the human child will act much like the dogs in this experiment, following the pointing gesture rather than the spoken word. This corroborates the idea that there is a lot of similarity in the way that dogs and human children think.”²

Teaching the ‘Drop It’ Command

If you’re a dog parent, you know all too well how important it is to train your pet to “drop it” or “release” on command. Dogs explore the world with their noses and mouths, and the things they sometimes pick up can be hazardous to their health.

That's why teaching the "drop it" command is so important. It's also a big benefit when you play fetch or other games with your dog. It's much easier to pick up that slimy tennis ball from the grass than it is to try to wrestle it from Buddy's frothy mouth. For most dogs, the "drop it" command is easy to learn when taught the right way, which is to present your pet with a trade — the object in his mouth for the **treat** in your hand. The Spruce offers these "drop it" training steps:³

- Hold one of your **dog's favorite toys** in your hand and tell her to "take it." If she's really jazzed about the toy, let her play with it for a couple of minutes before you start training, but make sure not to let her play so long she gets bored with it.
- While your dog has the toy in her mouth, hold a treat up to her nose. As soon as she releases the toy, give her the treat.
- Repeat the above actions as many times as it takes until your dog is responding reliably.
- Now add the verbal command "drop it." Say it convincingly and clearly while holding the treat near her nose.
- After several repetitions, hold the treat away from her nose, and gradually increase the distance if she continues to respond to the "drop it" command.
- Now begin using the command without the treat, and add a pointing gesture toward the ground. Praise your dog when she drops the toy.

Ideally, your dog should learn to reliably and quickly respond to your "drop it" command and pointing gesture every time you give it.

The Most Important Thing to Remember When Training Your Dog

When you're about to teach a new behavior or spend time reinforcing a recently learned behavior with your four-legged family member, say these three words to yourself: Make it fun! Training should be an enjoyable experience for both you and your dog. The key is to **make your dog want to do the behavior** rather than forcing him to do it, so use whatever will draw him into the "game." Make it seem like the two of you are about to have some fun by using your voice, playful body language, a treat, a toy, etc.

Sources and References

[dvm360 February 14, 2018](#)

¹ [Animal Cognition, January 2018, Volume 21, Issue 1, pp 119-126](#)

² [Psychology Today, November 30, 2017](#)

³ [The Spruce, November 8, 2017](#)
