

Let's talk about...

Training a self – settle

Choosing to Self Settle

Training sessions for these exercises should last no more than 15 minutes at a time, less if the dog is showing signs of tiredness. Adapt the exercises as necessary to suit the dog.

For many people, a dog that can relax in a distracting environment is highly desirable. The self-settle differs from the 'Down' obedience behaviour because the dog is choosing to lie down in a relaxed manner and is able to observe the world around it, or fall asleep, without reacting and without focusing on the owner waiting for the next cue. This is not an obedience Down- Stay where the dog is expected to remain in the same position until released or given another task.

Self-Settle – Indoors

The first stage of this training should take place in a distraction-free environment with the dog on a flat collar and lead at least 1.5m long, allowing you to keep hold of the end. Using a settle mat will help. You can sit in a chair or stand in a relaxed pose. The dog is allowed enough lead to stand, sit or lie down comfortably but not enough to jump up or move around. You will need a store of treats to hand (in a treat bag / nearby pot etc). If you want to use this to teach your dog to relax on their bed, ensure you're standing or sitting alongside their bed.

Holding the lead, actively ignore the dog ensuring no eye contact and complete disengagement. You should not physically or verbally cue the dog to perform any behaviour, just wait for the dog to show signs of relaxation such as sitting or lying down. Reward this relaxed behaviour without giving eye contact, verbal or physical praise by slowly placing a food reward on the floor in front of the dog so the dog does not have to move to reach it. For highly persistent or owner-focussed dogs it is necessary to reward very small behaviours such as looking away from the owner, and gradually build up to rewarding the more relaxed behaviours. For all dogs the aim is to shape and



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reward a relaxed down. For some dogs, you will notice that while their body may appear relaxed, their mind is focused on you and getting the food. Wait this out, and be ready to reward the instant the dog mentally switches off from the food initially. You can build up the relaxation duration gradually later on.

Once the dog has offered a relaxed behaviour and earned a reward, continue to reward the dog at a high enough frequency to keep the dog in the relaxed position. If the dog breaks the position, wait until the dog resumes the position before rewarding again. After a maximum of two minutes of rewarding relaxed behaviour make eye contact with the dog, encouraging them to move. Then re-settle in exactly the same way in a different part of the room, rewarding as before. Once the dog is reliably self-settling as soon as you withdraw attention, you can start to add distractions such as someone walking past the dog, moving toys at a distance or opening the room door. Continue to reward the dog with food on the floor in front of them during these distractions, increasing the reward rate as necessary to keep the dog in the relaxed position. Once the dog is able to remain relaxed in the face of distractions, and the reward rate had slowed to less than one reward a minute, move the training outside or to a more distracting environment.

Choosing Self Settle – Outside

In a quiet corner of a field or park, with grass underfoot to encourage the dog to lie down if necessary. As before, when the dog lies down (or is relaxed and un-reactive even if standing) reward with food placed in front of them. Keep the reward rate high enough to maintain the behaviour in this more distracting environment. After approximately 2 minutes of settled behaviour you can interact with the dog, before moving to a different place and repeating. Increase or decrease the reward rate as necessary to keep the dog in the relaxed position. Over time the rate of reinforcement can be reduced, and dogs will often choose to self-settle whenever the owner disengages with them, whether on or off lead.

