

THE DOGGY DIGEST

TRAINING TIPS BROUGHT TO YOU BY MUTTS WITH MANNERS

Distractions, Distractions, Distractions!

When Increasing Them Becomes a Detriment to Fido's Behavior Instead of a Challenge

By Trelle Dandridge - Mutts with Manners

One of the most common challenges in dog training is figuring out when and how to add distractions. Distractions are everywhere...sights, sounds, smells, movement, people, other animals, and they are part of life. Training our dogs to focus and perform around distractions is essential for real-world reliability.

But here's the catch: most handlers add distractions too quickly. The result? Confusion, frustration, and a dog who suddenly "forgets" what they once knew so well at home.

The next private lesson is often spent unraveling what went wrong, and the answer is almost always the same: **the distractions were increased too fast for the dog to succeed.**

Signs You've Added Too Much, Too Soon

So how do you know if you've pushed Fido beyond his learning zone?

- **The behavior falls apart.** Your dog suddenly stops performing a cue they once did with ease in a simpler setting.
- **The duration disappears.** A rock-solid 60-second sit-stay in the kitchen crumbles after just three seconds at the park.
- **The dog disengages.** Instead of focusing on you, they fixate on the environment—sniffing, staring, or pulling toward the distraction.

Think of it like math class: you wouldn't expect a child to jump straight from single-digit addition to solving algebra equations overnight. Dogs need many gradual steps in between.

Breaking Down Distractions: The Layers to Consider

Not all distractions are equal. A quiet living room with a squeaky toy on the floor is a very different challenge than a crowded Farmer's Market. Some categories of distraction include:

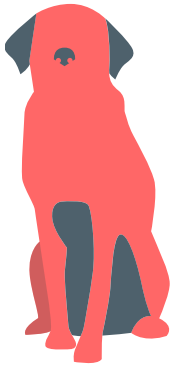
- **Location/environment:** Indoors vs outdoors, familiar vs unfamiliar places.
- **Movement:** Still objects vs people walking, running, biking, skateboarding, or dogs playing.
- **Novelty:** New sights, smells, sounds, or surfaces underfoot.
- **Intensity:** One dog across the street vs five dogs playing off leash

When you lump too many distraction layers together, your dog's brain gets overloaded, and learning shuts down.

The Key: Successive Approximations (Shaping)

Positive reinforcement training isn't just about rewarding the right behavior—it's about building it up gradually through **successive approximations.**

That means instead of going from your kitchen to the Farmer's Market overnight, you add distractions step by step. For example:



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1. **Kitchen or living room:** Practice sit-stays with you shifting your weight, moving one foot, then walking in a small circle (not around your dog).
2. **Backyard (slightly more distracting):** Add natural sounds, smells, and mild outdoor distractions.
3. **Quiet public area:** Practice in a low-traffic park corner.
4. **Moderate challenge:** Move closer to paths with joggers or bicyclists.
5. **High challenge:** Finally, attempt that same sit-stay near the Farmer's Market, but only after your dog has been successful at each prior stage. Remember, you can always go back to the previous step where your dog was successful and break down that next jump in distractions in to smaller approximations.

At every stage, reward generously and lower criteria if your dog struggles.

Setting Your Dog Up for Success

When adding distractions, remember these golden rules:

- **Raise one criteria at a time.** Don't increase duration, distance, and distraction all at once.
- **Keep sessions short and sweet.** Quit while your dog is still successful.
- **Reward big for big effort.** Use high-value treats when the environment is tough.
- **Go back a step when needed.** If your dog fails, it's a sign to simplify—not to push harder.

Final Thoughts

Distractions are not the enemy—they are the bridge between training in your living room and living successfully in the real world. When approached with patience, positive reinforcement, and successive approximations, distractions stop being a roadblock and start becoming opportunities for your dog to shine.

Remember: just like children need stepping-stones from addition to algebra, our dogs need those stepping-stones, too. Build slowly, reward often, and watch your dog's confidence—and reliability—grow.