

# Agility

## Trick training

**Did You Know?**  
 You can download the agility calendar with your preferred events?  
[www.dogagility.org.nz/comp/event-info.html](http://www.dogagility.org.nz/comp/event-info.html)

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When we think about trick training, we often think of complicated tricks and routines we see on television. And while you can work up to doing things like that, getting started is much simpler and doesn't need to be daunting. Many of the things you and your dog can currently do are in fact 'tricks'.

### What counts as a trick?

At its core, a trick is a behaviour performed by a dog following a cue from the handler. That cue might be verbal, physical, or a combination of both. You probably have already taught your dog a number of behaviours without realising they are tricks.

In Obedience we teach our dogs to sit, down, stay, present and retrieve, all behaviours taught to be performed on a cue and therefore meet the criteria for a trick. In Rally-O there are a ton of tricks such as walking at heel, circling around the handler, finish left and right, stand, and send around an object.

If you train Agility, your dog will know a tunnel send, hoop jump, jump, weaving, walking on a raised plank (dog walk), a see-saw, two on/two off — all tricks.

Dogs doing breed showing will know how to stack, stand, and walk at heel. Scent Work dogs have been taught container searches and finding a novel scent in different environments.

Or you might have taught some more complicated tricks requiring chained behaviours such as opening a door, putting away their toys, or fetching mail from the mailbox. All of these start with more basic tricks that you can build on: fetch, retrieve to hand, and tugging on a rope.

### What type of dog can learn tricks?

Any dog can learn to do tricks. For those with physical limitations there are plenty of tricks you can choose to teach that don't require physical strength, instead engaging the brain more. You will find that the more tricks you teach your dog, the easier it is for them to learn new tricks. You are teaching them *how* to learn.

Some tricks won't suit certain dogs. For example, my dogs are too big for me to teach them to jump through my arms, but you can get creative and find alternatives or simply choose from the multitude of other tricks.

### Why should I spend time training tricks?

Trick training is a wonderful way to build your dog's confidence, get them to engage their brain, teach life skills, and enhance your relationship with your dog. It requires trust and co-operation between you and your dog, and helps you learn how your dog thinks and what motivates them.

Trick training is mentally tiring for dogs. A short session every day can help immensely with providing mental stimulation. It is also perfect for dogs recovering from injury that cannot get their normal levels of physical activity pick tricks that are suitable for their current physical limitations.

Some of my tricks have come in helpful in day-to-day life, such as on vet visits. On our last visit I was able to ask one of my dogs to 'play dead', which meant he was able to lie still on his side, unrestrained and calm.

### Methods of teaching tricks

There are many ways to teach a dog a new trick, and different dogs will learn in different ways. Different tricks are easier to teach using different methods.

Wherever I can, I will teach using shaping. I love seeing the dogs actively engaging in the process, thinking, and offering behaviours, and just being willing to give things a go. Shaping is a skill in itself and requires not only the dog to engage with you and its surroundings, but also for you as a handler to be skilled in the use of reward markers and using them at the right time.

**Luring** is the process of encouraging a dog to follow a treat or toy to get into the correct position or perform a behaviour. You might use luring to start teaching tricks such as sit, saying their prayers (paws on arm or chair, with head dipped below arm), or jumping through a hoop.

**Capturing** is the process of waiting for the dog to offer the behaviour naturally and capturing and rewarding it in the moment. This is perfect for natural behaviours that you want the dog to be able to perform on cue but can be hard to teach in other ways such as bark, yawn, sneeze or bow. Think about when your dog offers this behaviour such as when play bowing or stretching after a sleep.



Photo: Sit Stay Play Photography

**Shaping** is the process of building a behaviour by rewarding progressive steps closer to the desired final behaviour. You could use this technique to teach things such as putting paws up on an object, playing soccer, or climbing into a box. If you wanted to teach a dog to put all four paws in a box you would start with a box on the ground, and mark and reward when the dog first looks at or engages with the box in any way, such as nosing at it. After a few times you will up the ante and only reward when they touch it with a paw rather than their nose. Then as soon as they put one paw in, then two and so on. Think about how you can break down the skill into smaller steps that get you to the desired behaviour. You will need to read your dog. If they are getting frustrated, go back a step and reward a lesser step to keep him motivated.

### A couple of simple tricks to get started

**Go Around / Send Around an Object** The dog leaves the handler and goes around an object/cone/barrel at least one meter from the handler. You can start teaching this one using luring. With a treat in hand, lure your dog around a pole or cone, rewarding as their head comes back around to face you, once they have gone 180 degrees around the object. Pair with a cue such as 'round'. After a few times luring and them doing this confidently take a wee step back so they have to take a step away from you to go around your object.

Mark the behaviour as soon as their head comes around the object and follow quickly with a reward. Gradually increase your distance away from the object.

**Paws Up on an Object** The dog will place both front paws on an object on cue. This is a great one to teach using shaping, and to introduce shaping to your dog. You will need a raised surface such as a solid box, a step stool, a pedestal, or a plant pot. Start by rewarding any interest in the object, even just looking at it. If they have not noticed it you could tap it with your foot or hand. Reward steps towards the right behaviour — stepping towards it, nosing it, pawing at it. Gradually increase your criteria and only reward touching it with a paw, and then paw on top, and then two paws on top.

Don't forget: learning new things is mentally taxing. Keep sessions short and fun, with lots of big rewards! Teaching a new trick might take several sessions. Trick training requires patience and perseverance.

### How can I learn more?

One of the great things about trick training is you can do it in your own time, in your own space, without a lot of expensive equipment.

There are several certified trick dog instructors around New Zealand, and many offer free online Facebook trick training groups. You will have the opportunity to learn new tricks, get help and ideas, and see others working on tricks for inspiration. There are options to earn trick dog titles, though these are not currently recognised in New Zealand. Some may also offer in-person classes or seminars. Some local dog training clubs may also offer trick classes. 🐾

Cherie Picking

Certified Trick Dog Instructor (Do More With Your Dog)

