

Teaching Your Dog Voluntary Attention



What is the voluntary check in?

The voluntary check in is a way to teach our dogs to seek direction and guidance from us via unprompted eye contact every 5-7 seconds. This is a very simple exercise that can improve your bond with your dog, lead to very nice loose leash walking, and serve as a foundation for many other training exercises.

That sounds great! How do I teach it?

Easy! Follow these steps



How is voluntary attention different from a "watch me" command?

Our goal in teaching the auto check in is to reward our dogs for **voluntarily** seeking guidance from us. This puts the responsibility on our dog rather than on us to nag them for their attention. When we reward their voluntary response, they are learning the reward for an internal choice rather than a response to external pressure. Rather than rewarding the end product (eye contact), we are rewarding the **choice** to make eye contact.

Where should I teach the voluntary check in?

Every new training exercise is easiest to teach inside, with no distractions. If a distraction is too engaging, it will be hard for your dog to take their attention away from it and back to you. Once your dog learns to automatically check in, it will become a habit and you can then "take it on the road" and try increasingly difficult situations.

What should I use as a reward?

You should use both a high value food treat (chicken, cheese, or hot dog) **and** lots of verbal praise. Part of the reward for you in this exercise is building the bond with your dog. Really tell him how great it is when he checks in with you!

What if it is taking forever for my dog to check in with me the first time?

The most important part of the voluntary check in is that we let our dogs be the ones to decide when to look. That being said, if you are having a very hard time even in a space with no distractions and with very high value treats, you can try gently stepping into your dog's periphery or shuffling your feet the first time to get your dog's eye contact. This is not really waiting for him to choose, but is not specifically asking him to watch either.

1. Pick a quiet location without many distractions and take up about half the slack in your dog's leash.

2. Stand still and do not speak. Watch your dog and try to release any tension in your leash.

3. Wait patiently for your dog to turn back and look at you. This may take several minutes!

4. Resist the urge while waiting to actively seek your dog's attention. Stand still and silent.

5. When your dog voluntarily looks at you, begin animatedly rewarding with verbal praise and treats. Make the reward really special!

6. Continue rewarding for about 10 seconds with praise and high value treats.

7. Once you have finished the reinforcement, the dog may resume normal activity.

8. Repeat steps 2-6

9. As you practice, you should expect significant decreases in the amount of time it takes for your dog to check in. If he is having a hard time learning to voluntarily look at you, try in an area with less distractions and/or with higher value treats.