

ASK THE TRAINER



Question:
“My dog is always running out the front door and I’m worried that he won’t come back or will get hurt.

How can I stop him from doing that?”

Answer:

One of the most important behaviours you can teach your dog is to wait at the door. Door dashing is very frustrating for owners and can be very dangerous for your dog.

The best way to prevent door dashing is to never allow your dog to learn that behaviour in the first place. Access through a door is highly reinforcing for dogs. It can lead to walks, car rides, trips to the park, greeting people and other dogs.

In order to teach your dog to wait at the door while it is open, he must already be able to perform a stationary behaviour such as a sit, down, wait, or watch me (eye contact). Also, your dog should have a solid understanding of a release cue. That is, that he is able to maintain the cued behaviour until given the release cue. A common release cue is “okay” or “let’s go.”

Practice “wait at the door” after a walk so that he is not overly anxious to get out. For safety reasons, please keep him on a long leash.

Set him up a couple of feet away from the door and ask him to perform a stationary behaviour that he knows well and can perform in a variety of settings. We’ll use “sit” for this article.

Position yourself between your dog and the door, standing as close to the door



handle as possible. Cue your dog to sit, and as soon as his rear end hits the ground, open the door slightly. If your dog breaks the sit and moves towards the door then swiftly shut it. Do not say anything, like “no”. You want him to think that moving towards the door causes it to close and maintaining a sit causes it to open. Let him figure that out.

Re-cue sit and try again. Open the door slightly and then a little wider; if your dog maintains the sit for a second then give him the release cue and allow access through the door. Praise him and allow for a quick sniff outside.

Happily lead him back inside and practice again, this time increasing the amount of time he maintains a sit. Raise your criteria very slowly to set him up for success. If he can stay for one second then try three seconds, five seconds and so on. Fluctuate between shorter and longer amounts of time. If you’re stuck at a certain amount of time then go back to when you were successful and gradually build from there. Keep your training sessions short, approximately five minutes a day.

You want him to learn that moving towards the door while it is open removes access (by causing the door to close) and that maintaining a stationary behaviour, such as sit, causes the door to open. It’s his choice and you provide the consequence.

Once your dog is reliably performing this exercise, you can start to add in distractions. Ring the doorbell or knock on the door and then gradually have a friend stand outside.

Remember that going through the door is one of the most rewarding things your dog can do, so use this as an opportunity to reinforce a solid sit.

If he does dash out the door, do not chase him, as the game of chase can be very rewarding. Create some excitement and either run to a neighbour’s porch or open the car door or excitedly ask him if he wants to go for a walk. Praise him when he does come.

Happy Training.

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