



# **Basic Obedience Training**

Training Your Dog with Low-Level Stimulation

**By George Hickox**

For more than 30 years, George Hickox has been one of the world's foremost dog trainers and is known for his unparalleled relationship-centered electronic collar training. He has trained numerous field champion dogs and National High Point Champions. His training videos and schools have claimed top honors by the Outdoor Writers of America and Videographers Association.

## **Introduction**

Welcome to the world of electronic training. The focus of this primer on training with low-level stimulation is to help dog owners better understand how dogs learn. As with any dog-training method, there is a right way and a wrong way. Training with a program of low-level stimulation develops happy and obedient dogs – dogs that respond to commands with excellence and with tail-wagging enthusiasm.

Using low-level electronics in a consistent training program is easy for owners to do and even easier for dogs to understand. Training with low-level stimulation is safe and humane. There are many myths surrounding the electronic collar, but by taking the time to understand how your dog learns and the basics of low-level-stimulation training, you can develop bold, confident, and happy dogs that respond to commands with style.

## **How Dogs Learn**

Dogs learn by association, as Pavlov's canine studies fully demonstrated. Pavlov rang a bell and then offered food to the dog. He did this repeatedly until, after a number of consistent repetitions of his ringing the bell and presenting food, the dogs began to salivate upon hearing the bell alone, before the food was even offered.

Because the food presentation always followed the sound of the bell, the dogs anticipated and expected that a snack was soon to come once they heard the ringing. In other words, the dogs developed an association between the ringing of the bell and the presentation of food.

The pairing of bell ringing with food presentation was consistent. Pavlov always offered the food immediately after ringing the bell. Consistent repetitions are the key to successful dog training.

Another thing to keep in mind is that dogs are also highly motivated to act in their own best interests. Successful trainers take advantage of this motivation along with the canine's strong powers of association.

In obedience training, as with more advanced training, we want to create a conditioned response to a specific cue or command. In Pavlov's experiments, he developed a dog that automatically salivated when the bell rang. As trainers, we are striving instead to train a dog to respond to commands such as "Kennel," "Sit" or "Whoa," "Here" or "Come," and "Heel" the first time we give the command. We want to develop a conditioned response. We want the dog to sit every time we command "Sit" – not occasionally, but all of the time. It is not a democracy; the commands are not subject to a vote. If a dog is chasing a cat, bird, or another dog that is running out into the road, we want the dog to respond to the "stop" command (sit or whoa) immediately. We do not want the dog to ignore the command because he would rather keep on chasing. We love our dogs and want to keep them out of harm's way. There is no better way to protect them than through training. The goal in training is to teach dogs to comply to commands with a conditioned response, a response that they don't think about each time they hear a command. This means we must be consistent.

## **Dogs are Place Oriented**

Because the dog has such a strong propensity to associate, he associates negatives and positives with specific places. This means that as trainers we must reward or correct the dog where the desired or undesired behavior occurred. If we command the dog to sit at point A and the dog instead moves to point B, 20 yards away, it is a mistake to reprimand the dog at point B. The dog will associate the correction with what he is doing at point B. As a result, the dog will not associate the correction with the failure to comply with the "sit" command at point A and will have no idea what is wrong with what he is doing at point B. This will lead to apprehension, confusion, and lack of trust.

We can incorporate the dog's natural inclination to be place oriented throughout our training. Teaching a dog to stop and stay stopped, heel, respond to the recall command, or stay out of the garbage all involve place orientation. As trainers, we can take advantage of the dog's characteristics and make them work for us, not against us. It is also important to understand that, in addition to rewarding or correcting the dog at the place where the behavior occurred, the trainer must respond quickly. For example, if we command, "Here," and the dog runs away, correcting the dog five minutes later or when we finally catch him at a different place will be counterproductive. The dog will not associate the correction with originally failing to obey the "here"

command. Rewarding or correcting the dog at the place where the act occurred soon after its occurrence is important for the dog to make the desire association.

### **Dogs Are Pack Animals**

In every pack there is a leader, and one leader only. Our dogs must perceive us as the leader of the pack or they will do whatever they want whenever they want to do it.

This does not mean we should be harsh with our dogs. It does mean we must first show our dogs what we want of them, incorporate consistent repetitions in all of our teachings, and understand that dogs are place oriented. Good trainers are patient mentors who do not have unrealistic expectations of their dogs. We should think of ourselves as teachers, not hard disciplinarians, while at the same time being fair and benevolent dictators.

If we are consistent, give a command only once, reward for success, and correct for non-compliance at the proper place, the dog will perceive us as a trusted leader. It is a dog's nature to test, but there will be much less testing if we are consistent, understand how a dog learns, what motivates him, and train him in a dog's language. You and your dog will be happier and more successful as a result.

### **Dogs Are Not Born Understanding the English Language**

Unfortunately, far too many dog owners operate under the false perception that their dog innately understands what they are saying. It is common to hear someone say, "My dog is really smart". The problem is that even really smart dogs need to be shown what a command means numerous times before they get it. Attributing too many smarts to a dog may lead the owner to thinking his dog will know what behavior is expected in response to a particular command after being shown only a few times. The result is that the owner may correct the dog for non-compliance when the dog does not understand why he is being corrected. The dog, by his nature, will associate the correction with something. However, the association the dog makes may well not be the association the owner was intending. It is important to understand that a dog should never be corrected if he does not understand why the correction is taking place.

The take-home point here is that, before correcting a dog, it is imperative to show him what is expected - numerous times. I call the first stage of learning "Show Pups". My objective is to show the dog the response I am looking for when I give the command. In "Show Pups," the goal is to help the dog understand. Err on the side of caution. If you think the dog has "got it," do some more "Show Pups". Two weeks of "Show Pups" is better than two hours of "Show Pups". I will further discuss "Show Pups" when we get into the specifics of how to start "kennel," "sit" or "whoa," "here" or "come," and "heel".

### **Summary of Dog-Training Principles**

- \* Dogs learn by association.
- \* Be consistent – make the association consistent.
- \* Dogs are motivated to act in their own self-interest.
- \* Things that are negative or positive are quickly imprinted.
- \* The dog must know why he is being corrected or rewarded.
- \* Dogs are place oriented – rewards and corrections must take place where and when the behavior occurred if the dog is to make the desired association.
- \* The dog is a pack animal – you must be perceived as the leader of the pack.

### **Teaching the Command "Kennel"**

The "kennel" command is the first command I teach. Because the dog is place oriented, it is easier for the canine pupil to learn the "kennel" command. I want to make learning easier for the dog, not harder. When teaching the "kennel" command, I introduce the "language" with which I teach all other commands.

When teaching the "kennel" command, I teach the dog to respond to the command the first time I give it. The dog will learn that escape hatches (non-compliance by running away, sulking, or fighting) will not work. Additionally, the dog will learn that he can turn off low-level stimulation by himself and will therefore ultimately learn that he can avoid the stimulation altogether by complying with the command the first time. The

canine student will also learn the concept of a “Safe Zone”. This concept can be used in teaching “here,” “heel,” “sit,” or “whoa”.

Teaching the “kennel” command provides the foundation for all future electronic collar training for basic obedience, as well as for more advanced training.

The fewer inconsistent commands the dog has had in the past, the easier it will be to teach “kennel”. The reason for this is that a dog that has had inconsistent commands and enforcements of those commands develops a habit of non-compliance. Although such a dog may like and trust his owner, he does not respect his owner. In other words, he does not perceive the owner as the leader of the pack. Reprogramming the behavior of such a dog may take a little longer (more repetitions) than it would the case of a youngster who has not developed bad habits. However, the teaching of the “kennel” command, done correctly, will make all dogs better companions.

#### A. “Show Pups” – The First Step

The first step in teaching any command is Show Pups. The more repetitions of Show Pups, the better. Ideally, Show Pups start as soon as the new puppy joins the family. It is easier to put an eight to twelve-week-old puppy into a kennel crate than a seventy-five pound two-year-old dog that insists on refusing entry. But even for the two-year-old delinquent, the “kennel” command is the start of the first step toward his becoming an obedient and compliant dog.

In the Show Pup stage of “kennel,” I hold the dog by the collar or physically pick up a puppy and place the student into the crate while saying “kennel, kennel, kennel,” in a gentle, upbeat tone. Think of Pavlov’s bell as “ding, ding, ding,” not “clang, clang, clang.” I praise him or give him a treat.

Do not take the approach of “Let’s see what happens if . . .” By that I mean resist the urge to give the “kennel” command without holding onto the dog to see what he will do. If the dog does not go in, either you will be forced to let him get away with it, and thereby teach him that he has options, or you will have to discipline him. Neither option is beneficial to your training program.

After numerous sessions of Show Pups with the “kennel” command, the dog will associate his going into the kennel with you saying “kennel, kennel, kennel”. Be consistent; always repeat the “kennel” command before putting the dog into his crate.

The objective of Show Pups is to teach the dog what the command means. It is not to ensure that the dog complies immediately upon hearing the command. Remember, we should never reward or correct a dog if the dog cannot associate the reward or correction with a specific behavior. An analogy I use in our training schools for owners and their dogs is that, if I adopted a child from a foreign country who does not speak English and I said “go to bed” in English, the child would not know what “go to bed” means. If I disciplined the child for failing to go to bed, I would not create trust. The child would not know why he was disciplined. The same is true with dogs. We need to do “Show Pups” first.

#### B. Find the Proper Level of Stimulation

Once I am sure the dog knows what the command means, the next step is to find the lowest level of stimulation the dog feels. If the stimulation is so low the dog cannot feel it, or if the stimulation is so high that the dog is in pain, it is the wrong level.

To find the proper level, place the collar on the dog’s neck. The collar should be at the high side of the dog’s neck, up close to his head. The neck is thinner there, and the collar cannot slide down to the thicker portion of the neck. If I place the collar low on the neck, near the collarbone, the collar may slide up and cause the prongs to fail to make contact; stimulation will thus be inconsistent. I should be able to slip two fingers under the electronic collar to ensure a proper fit.

With the dog on a check-cord or lead, turn the continuous stimulation on at the lowest level and look for a reaction from the dog. Maybe the dog looks around curiously. Perhaps he was wagging his tail and stops wagging, or an involuntary twitch occurs at the neck. I am trying to find the lowest level the dog feels. If the dog does not show any signs of feeling the stimulation, I move up one

level and repeat. Once I have established the lowest level the dog feels, that is the level I will use when training him.

Depending on a dog's past history and temperament, I may have to use higher levels during training, but eventually the dog will respond to the lowest level he can feel.

#### C. Stimulation – Command – Response

Once Show Pups have been completed (the dog understands what the command “kennel” means) and once the lowest level of stimulation has been determined, it is time to begin formal training. Formal training is the process of developing a dog to be motivated to respond to a given command with excellence the first time the command is given.

I start the dog on a check-cord or a long lead. With the dog facing the kennel crate from four to six feet away, I press continuous stimulation on the electronic collar at the lowest level the dog feels and then command “kennel” in an upbeat tone one time. If the dog goes into the kennel, I turn the stimulation off as soon as the dog is all the way in. If the dog does not go into the kennel, I keep the stimulation on and put him in. When the dog is all the way in the kennel, I turn the stimulation off. I do not repeat the command if he does not go in the kennel. I am teaching the dog to respond to the command the first time. For safety reasons, the electronic collar turns off in eight to ten seconds, even if you are depressing the continuous stimulation button. Therefore, I should get the dog into the kennel before the stimulation goes off. I praise the dog when he is in the kennel.

It most likely will not take very many sessions before the dog goes in the kennel upon feeling the stimulation, before I give the command. This is my benchmark. Once the dog will go into the kennel when he feels the stimulation, I know the pupil knows how to turn the stimulation off by himself. When he feels the stimulation, he goes into the kennel to solve this problem. He is doing this for himself, because it works for him.

#### D. Command – Stimulation – Response

When the dog will go into the kennel upon feeling the stimulation, it is time to move on. He has learned to turn the stimulation off, and it is now time to teach him to avoid the stimulation altogether. My benchmark for proceeding is when I know that he knows how to turn off the low-level stimulation. It does not matter if the dog learns to turn the stimulation off by going in the kennel on the first session or the fifth session. I keep the sessions short. Two short sessions of three to five minutes are much better than one long session of fifteen minutes.

Style and confidence may not exhibit themselves in the Stimulation – Command – Response phase of training. The dog will develop confidence later in the Command – Stimulation - Response phase. In the Stimulation – Command – Response phase, I am teaching the dog to turn stimulation off. My objective is to teach the canine student to avoid the stimulation altogether by complying with the command the first time it is given. It is easier for the dog to learn to avoid the stimulation if he first knows how to turn off the low-level stimulation.

Once the dog knows how to turn the stimulation off, never again stimulate him prior to giving the “kennel” command. He will not forget how to turn the stimulation off by going into the kennel.

Once he knows how to turn the stimulation off, advance to the Command – Stimulation – Response stage of training. Within six feet of the kennel, command “kennel” one time, turn on the low-level stimulation, and turn the stimulation off when the dog is in the kennel. In the beginning, the stimulation must follow the command. It is the only way that the dog can associate the stimulation with the command. After a very few consistent repetitions, the dog will anticipate that the stimulation will follow the command. The dog has made an association so that the command and the stimulation now elicit the same response: the dog goes into the kennel. This will bring you and your dog to the Command – Response stage.

#### E. Command – Response

In this phase, the dog goes into the kennel on the command the first time with no stimulation. Build confidence by being upbeat. Reward the dog's success. You may initially have a few set backs, but with enough consistent repetitions your dog will reliably go into the kennel the first time you give the command. If the dog tests you, do not repeat the command. Simply apply stimulation until the dog is in the kennel.

#### F. The Safe Zone

The kennel training has taught the dog the following:

1. He can turn stimulation off by entering the kennel.
2. He can avoid stimulation altogether by complying with the command.
3. Escape hatches do not work.

Additionally, he now understands the concept of a "Safe Zone." When the dog was in the kennel, there was never any stimulation. Because the dog learns by association and is place oriented, it does not take very many sessions before the dog grasps the Safe Zone concept. We are going to use the Safe Zone concept for teaching "stop" ("sit," "whoa," "stay"), the recall command ("here," "come"), and "heel".

#### G. Overview

Once you have taught your dog to respond to the "kennel" command reliably and enthusiastically, you already have a better-trained dog. The key is to begin with Show Pups, keep the training sessions short, be consistent, and reward success. As a guideline, the kennel process normally takes one to two weeks.

Daily exercise with numerous short sessions is the key.

### **The "Sit" or "Whoa" Command**

The second formal command I teach is "sit" or "whoa". If you have a pointing breed, I recommend teaching "whoa" before teaching "sit". "Whoa" means stand still. If the dog is taught "sit" before taught "whoa," he may have a tendency to sit when you want him to stand.

#### A. Show Pups

The first stage of teaching "sit" or "whoa" is Show Pups. Your dog must first understand what the command means. Because a dog is place oriented, I use a sit/whoa board. I make a raised wooden platform big enough for the dog to sit or stand on. The board is set on two-by-fours, and the flat surface is four inches off the ground. To teach "sit," I walk the dog onto the board and gently say "sit, sit, sit," while pushing the dog's rear into position. When the dog is sitting, I reward him with a piece of biscuit. To teach "whoa," I walk the dog on the board, stop, and say "whoa, whoa, whoa." When the dog is standing on the board, I reward him. After numerous repetitions on the sit/whoa board, the dog will think of the board as a good place where he will be rewarded for sitting or whoaing. Place a board by the back door and have the dog "sit" or "whoa" before going outside. When he comes in, put him on the board and reward him. As with the kennel exercise, the more Show Pups you do, the better. While the dog is on a lead or check-cord, on and off the board, do the Show Pups. Repetitions, repetitions, repetitions – these are the key.

#### B. Stimulation – Command – Response

Once the dog knows what the "sit" or "whoa" means, it is time to commence formal training for this command.

For "sit," I place the electronic collar around the dog's mid-section, with the contact points on the dog's back. For teaching "whoa," I place the electronic collar around the dog's mid-section with the contact points on the dog's belly. Because the dog is place oriented, he will interpret stimulation on his rear to mean "sit," and stimulation on his belly to mean stand. I only use the collar on the

back for “sit,” and I only use the collar on the belly for “whoa”. All other electronic collar work is done with the collar on the dog’s neck. This way, in the beginning, the dog does not become confused as to whether he should come back to me or sit/whoa when I teach the “here” and “heel” commands.

I walk the dog in the yard, turn on the low-level stimulation, and command “sit” or “whoa”. When the dog stops or sits, I turn the stimulation off. Because the dog already learned that he could turn stimulation off himself in the kennel exercise, he will quickly learn that he could turn stimulation off by stopping. The dog learned the concept of a Safe Zone in the kennel training and will quickly understand that when he sits/whoas in the place where he heard the command, that is a Safe Zone.

#### C. Command – Stimulation – Response

Once the dog stops upon feeling low-level stimulation, I know he knows how to turn stimulation off by stopping or sitting. When this is accomplished, I never put stimulation on before giving the “sit” or “whoa” command again.

Just as with the “kennel” drill, I move to Command – Stimulation – Response. I say the command, immediately I follow it with the low-level stimulation, and turn the stimulation off when the dog sits or whoas.

Then, in the yard with dog off a lead, I command “sit” or “whoa”. If the dog sits or whoas, I reward him. If the dog fails to comply, I stimulate until he responds. We want to train a conditioned response, wherein the dog hears the command to sit or whoa and complies with excellence, avoiding stimulation altogether. He responds reliably because it works for him.

#### D. The Sit/Whoa Board

When the dog responds reliably off the board, I walk the dog onto the board, command “sit” or “whoa,” and walk away. If the dog comes off the board, I apply the low-level stimulation and put him back on the board. When he is back on the board, I turn the stimulation off. The board is a Safe Zone.

When the dog remains on the board until I release him, I move to the ground. I command “sit” or “whoa”. If the dog moves, I turn the stimulation on and put him back on the imaginary board. The imaginary board is wherever he was when I commanded “sit” or “whoa”.

Once I begin teaching “here” and “heel,” I make a transition from the back or the belly to the dog’s neck, and the remainder of my collar work is done on the dog’s neck.

### **The Recall Command**

Whatever command you choose, “here,” “come,” or anything else, be consistent. Choose one command and stick with that command.

When the dog responds reliably to the “kennel” and either “sit” or “whoa” commands, it is time to formally teach “here.”

#### A. Show Pups

I always do the Show Pups with the dog on the check-cord or lead. I never take a dog out and say “here, here, here” and risk the dog won’t do it. That is the “let’s see what if…” approach. It is easier to teach a dog to recall if he has not already learned that he can get away with not coming.

I attach a twenty-foot check-cord or lead to the dog’s regular collar. I get down on my knees and say “here, here, here” while pulling the dog to me. I lavish the dog with praise when he gets to me. These Show Pups could have started from the first day I got the puppy, as could have show pups for “kennel” and either “sit” or “whoa”. The show pups for the three commands could have been going on simultaneously.

#### B. Stimulation – Command – Response

As in previous training, once the dog turns the stimulation off himself and I see that he understands what the command means, I progress to Command – Stimulation – Response. In the recall command, as soon as I turn the stimulation on (while on the dog’s neck) and he starts to come me, I know he knows how to turn stimulation off. In the Command – Stimulation – Response stage, I command “here,” apply stimulation, and it turn it off when the dog starts to come towards me. If, when I turn the stimulation off, he balks, I turn the stimulation on again until he starts towards me again.

If I overdo the “here” or “heel,” the dog will indeed perceive me as a Safe Zone and be reluctant to leave my side. That is why I recommend that you always train “kennel” and either “sit” or “whoa” before teaching “here” and “heel”.

## **The Heel Command**

Teaching the dog to walk at my knee without pulling my arm out of its socket is easy once I have taught “kennel,” either “sit” or “whoa,” and “here”. I will train the dog with the same language I used to teach the other commands. I am teaching the dog with a consistent program that is easy for him to understand. Far too many owners teach one thing to their dog this way and something else in a different methodology. They are communicating to the dog with a multitude of different languages. This only confuses the dog and prevents him from reaching his full potential.

### **A. Show Pups**

I walk the dog on a lead next to my side. It makes no difference which side I choose, but I must be consistent. If I want the dog to heel on the left, I always walk him on the left side. As the dog pulls, I bring him back to my side with a series of short jerks, while commanding “heel, heel, heel”. At this point in the dog’s training, I should have a cooperative student. The dog should grasp this concept in just a few sessions.

### **B. Stimulation – Command – Response**

With the dog on a lead, once I am sure he understands what the command “heel” means, I apply stimulation on the dog’s neck, command “heel” one time, pull the dog to my side and turn the stimulation off once the dog is by my side. My left side, if that is the side I choose, will now be a Safe Zone for “heel”.

### **C. Command – Stimulation – Response**

Once the dog heels, or comes to my side while on the check-cord or lead, I re-cue the command “heel,” stimulate, and turn the stimulation off when the dog responds by heeling at my side.

### **D. Command – Response**

Once I can give the command and the dog comes to my side, my dog and I have accomplished the Command – Response stage.

## **General Training Tips**

Let your dog become accustomed to running around with an electronic collar on his neck and belly or back before beginning formal training. This will help prevent your dog from becoming collar-wise. A collar-wise dog may respond only when he is wearing the collar. Place the non-live (the collar is off) electronic collar on the dog while doing Show Pups or taking the pup for a walk, etc.

Keep your training sessions short and upbeat.

If you have an aggressive dog, it is wise to seek professional help from an accomplished and knowledgeable trainer.