

Dog Agility Pre-School

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Proprioception Training

Overview: Agility dogs need the full set of athletic skills, just like human athletes. These skills include training of body awareness and balance. Some of the agility equipment can be hazardous, or at least frightening to a dog. These include in particular the dog walk, which is both narrow and high, and the teeter, which is narrow and moves. Body awareness is also necessary in the collecting and extension needed for safe and efficient jumping, and for collecting to time the entry into the weave poles. The bigger the dog, the more narrow and precision these obstacles are and the harder the pounding is on their bodies.

We teach dogs, especially big dogs, to be aware of the placement of their feet, especially their hind feet. Big dogs often have no idea where their two hind feet are in relation to the obstacles or even how to move them independently of their usual, “fixed action pattern” gaits, i.e. normal walking, trotting, galloping and jumping, which are mostly guided by the subconscious part of the brain. In DAPS, we do not consider it to be our dog’s “job” to meet these physical challenges without our help and instruction.

These are the exercises we will do to increase our dogs’ body awareness, sense of balance, and confidence. We will reinforce these behaviors so much that they will be fun and games for the dogs, and at the same time, the dog will be learning body awareness. Our dogs will therefore find the agility equipment to be safe, fun and reinforcing, and not stressful or predisposing to injury.

1. Backing up on the flat: Your dog should move backwards quickly on verbal or hand signal cue but not only in response to your body pressure (i.e., you walking forward toward him).
2. Walking up stairs. Some dogs actually can’t do this if they are completely unaware of their hind feet. Rocky could not walk up a flight of stairs for over a year despite our working hard at it.
3. Backing up steps. First we’ll teach them to back up on a placeboard and then all the way up a flight of steps.
4. Perch: the dog’s front feet remain stationary. You will click when the dog moves each hind foot. At first you use your body pressure to get your dog to start moving—be precise about your clicking. As soon as you can, you fade your body movement and cue your dog verbally or with hand signal to cross step his hind feet.
5. Ladder. An aluminum ladder on the ground is OK for large dogs, but smaller dogs will need a homemade ladder, for example out of PVC adjusted for the dog’s height. Poles should NOT be lying on the ground (Susan Salo recommends against this type of cavaletti work). The dog should trot confidently through the ladder, not gallop or bunny hop or try to get out of the ladder as quickly as possible
6. Cavaletti: I use a series of PVC jump bases making an alleyway with the bars lying loosely across the alleyway, propped 4”-6” off the ground. The poles should not be evenly spaced. As in the ladder work, the dog should trot confidently through the cavaletti with measured, conscious steps, without displacing the loose bars—after all that is the entire point of the exercise. At first the dogs will bunny hop through and knock bars here and there, so you will shape the timing of her gait to teach her to do this correctly.
7. Tippy, wobble or buja board: Puppies start with this exercise, and we’ll reintroduce it with a larger board and higher ball center. You will click your dog’s intentional movement of the board and put a cue with this behavior. The point of the wobbleboard is *not* for the dog to tolerate the movement when you entice her to move on the board or lure her with your body. The dog should be intentionally banging and moving the board and having a grand old time doing it.
8. Raised plank shaping. I also call this the mountain goat exercise. You raise a teeter sized plank or the equivalent starting low and working up to 3’ off the ground. A teeter plank poised on two pause tables works well. So does a picnic table bench seat. You will free shape this. The dog will get reinforcements for interacting any way she likes with the plank. You will try to capture the dog turning around in the middle of the raised plank. You will also encourage your dog to jump off and back on.
9. Bang game. If you have an adjustable teeter or a fixed teeter, you tip up the “down” end on a chair or table, allowing the other end to play about 1 foot off the ground. Again, you free shape this, hoping to capture and click the dog banging the teeter. Ideally your dog will love to run up and down the plank, turning around in the middle and banging the free end.