



When to add a verbal cue to behaviours and why

For lots of behaviours that I do with my dogs I don't add a verbal cue at all as I often don't need one – the physical cue is enough. E.g. If I put my hand out sideways my dogs will touch it without me saying 'touch'.

For behaviours that will need a verbal cue I only add one once I know the dog will do the end behaviour 100% of the time.

So if I hold a closed fist upward and the dog sits every time I do it, not just in the kitchen but in the garden, at puppy class, on a walk and in the pet shop then I know I'm at the stage to add the verbal cue.

The reason I wait until this stage is that when I give a verbal cue, I want to be sure it will be followed first time every time. If I start adding sit before the puppy fully knows how to sit and sometimes does it and sometimes doesn't then I end up saying 'sit, sit, sit, SIT'. The puppy then learns to a) ignore what's being asked or b) doesn't have to do it first time, 4th or 5th is good enough (it isn't!)

Don't be in a rush to add a verbal cue – it's easy enough to do when the puppy has the behaviour.

When adding a cue make sure it's something that doesn't sound like something else – cues should be different so as not to add confusion. You then simply pair the cue with the behaviour by doing the physical cue (if you have one) and adding the verbal at the same time and then reward the dog as normal. Eventually once you are confident your dog knows the verbal cue you can drop the physical cue.

Some shaped behaviours (particularly in agility) we want the dog to know without a physical cue first, (think shaping a wing wrap). In this case work on shaping the behaviour you want and when the dog offers it reliably (every time you stand in front of a wing) you can then add your verbal cue. Once the verbal cue is known you can then add the physical cue to it (handling – front cross, post turn etc.)

Ultimately you want to know that when you give a cue it will be followed first time every time – if it's not, more training is needed!