



Eye Contact for Reactivity

“Watch” is a cue for your dog to give you eye contact. At first, we teach our dogs to look into our eyes for a second or so, then we build duration, and then we add distractions. The ultimate goal is for your dog to maintain eye contact with you no matter what is going on around them. This is a fantastic focus exercise that teaches your dog to look to you for cues in every situation.

Before using it, however, we have to ascribe meaning to the cue. Here are the steps to build a solid watch. Be sure to get 5 successful repetitions in a row before moving on to the next step. If you’re getting fewer than 3 out of 5 correct responses, go back a step.

1. Put a treat between your thumb and index finger. Bring the treat from your dog’s nose up to your eyes and say, “Good!” (or click) the instant his eyes meet yours. Then reward him with the treat.
2. Signal your dog to make eye contact with you by bringing your empty hand from your dog’s nose up to your eyes and say, “Good!” (or click) the instant his eyes meet yours. Then reward him with the treat.
3. Next, say “Watch” and **then** give your dog the hand signal. As soon as his eyes meet yours, give him a treat from your other hand. Be sure to give the verbal cue (“Watch”) before you give the hand signal – don’t do them at the same time.
4. Next, say “Watch” and count to five. If your dog doesn’t make eye contact with you, give him the hand signal and reward him as soon as he does. Repeat this until your dog is making eye contact with you for the verbal cue only. And don’t forget to reward for each correct response!
5. Now it’s time to make it harder by gradually adding duration (the amount of time he needs to maintain eye contact with you). Once you’ve got about 10 seconds, you can gradually add distractions (practicing in your back yard, then your driveway, then your sidewalk, then while out on a walk, etc.).

If your dog gets hyper-focused on other dogs, cats, squirrels, or anything else in the environment, you can now use your “Watch” cue to get his focus back on you.

6. Start with your dog at a distance from other dogs that she is not barking and lunging and is happy to take food.
7. Wait for him to look at the other dog.
8. As soon as he does, say “Watch!”.
9. If he looks at you, tell him what a good boy he is and reward him with a high value treat.
10. If he does not look back at you, use your voice, kissy sounds, a food lure, or take a few steps backwards to re-orient him.
11. When his head is oriented toward you, reward him with a high-value treat.
12. If he is successful at least 10 times in a row, gradually decrease the distance between him and the other dog (or other distraction).
13. If he is struggling, increase the distance and try again.