

Rock solid stays anytime anywhere

Nancy Gyes, June 2005

How does everyday life reflect on your ability to get your dog to stay on the startline without moving a toe? If you are practicing stays many times every week, and still your dog is moving on the start line, you need to take a hard look at why your dog is still unwilling or unable, to stay when you ask.

Be honest with yourself about your dog's stay problem

Q. Do you ever forget your dog after you have told him to stay? Like by telling him to stay and then walking an agility exercise, and minutes later look over to find he has wandered away?

A. Don't do it! Either keep your eye on your dog and immediately fix the dogs' moving out of position, or put them in a cage or on a tie down. Do not tell them to stay if you cannot monitor their performance 100% of the time.

Q. Do you have "casual stays"? Ones where you tell the dog to stay but do not really expect him to, or even care if he does? Or does that stay not count because you did not really mean it, or feel like this is a "formal" stay?

A. EVERY stay is an opportunity for you to show the dog how you want him to respond to your command, not just the ones when he is in front of a jump.

Q. Will your dog jump out of his stay position on a one word release command from you, without YOU moving a muscle?

A. You need to treat the release command such as "OK" as a trained behavior and mark and reward the command until you are certain that the one word command is the only way that your dog moves out of position. Reward the release command as often as you reward the stay command. And don't forget to use it once you have taught it☺

Don't walk back to your dog, open your arms and lavishly praise your dog and allow him to get up before he hears a release.

Q. Do you reinforce every stay you ask your dog to do with a specific end to the exercise, even if your dog is just sitting for a moment by your side while you tie your shoe or do some other common casual behavior?

A. Each test of the stay command should have a beginning and an end. The command to stay is the beginning; the release word is the end.

Q. Do you know why your dog breaks his start? Anxiety, fear, willfulness, impatience, bad training?

A. Breaking stays because of anxiety and fear need to be treated different than the behavior of a dog moving during stays that is not well trained or is an anticipating the release. You may need to do lots of socializing for the fearful dog around the

start line, and rewards could possibly come from someone else so that the dog looks forward to you departing, and to strangers approaching. If you do not know why your dog does a behavior like moving on a stay, then it may make it more difficult to repair the problem. Often dogs have been inadvertently trained to release on your movement, even your slightest movement. Maybe your dog is moving when you:

lift your hand to cue the start,
look over your shoulder to see if the dog is staying,
open your mouth to release,
stop walking forward on your leadout.

You need to find out **WHY** the dog's motion is happening and then train the dog to stay through your inadvertent cue.

Q. Do you know the **LEAST** likely place **AWAY** from agility that your dog will hold a perfect stay? If you do, then you have a perfect place to train away from agility.

A. Good stays should be taught away from agility. Do not approach an agility jump to begin stay training. That should be taught before you ever teach your dog to jump. Stays in a high level distracting environment in your home or at the park are the foundation for good startlines. Practice 10 times more often away from agility as you do during agility.

Q. Do you tell your dog to stay more than one time; or allow him to move, place him back in position and still let him run an exercise without staying perfectly the **FIRST** time you walked away?

A. The dog should be allowed access to the equipment only after staying perfectly the **FIRST** time you leave your dogs side. If you must speak to your dog to fix his stay, repeat your command, or return to your dog, you need to release him, move him out of position, and begin again.

Q. Do you walk away from your dog not watching him, then turn and find out he has moved? And do you continue to repeat this behavior without fixing it over and over and over again?

A. Don't take your eyes off your dog if he often scooches or breaks. Instantly mark incorrect movement with a quick, "whoops, wrong, Uh oh, Oh my goodness!" or other marker and immediately return to your dog to replace them in position. If you do not catch the dog as he moves, you are giving late, inaccurate or wrong information. Never come back to a dog and do a late correction.

Q. Do you use the excuse that you don't want to train stays during class, because you might take up too much time and/or not get to do the drills?

A. You must find a way to train while you practice. Consider creating a training group just for dogs with stay problems. Meet once a week away from agility class to train. Or skip your run at class and train your stay instead.

Q. Do you think you have fixed your stay problem a few times over the months or years, but it keeps coming back? Do you stop practicing or reinforcing stays after you have had few, or even many good start-lines?

A. Once you have had a start-line problem, you should assume you will always have it. With maintenance you can control it, and maybe you can even say it is mostly cured, but the moment you think you no longer need to train it, you will find the problem has been in remission, not cured. Train it, or lose it.

Q. Do you allow your dog to move one foot, or have just one adjustment of position, or one scooch of the butt on his stay?

A. It is a slippery slope you go down if you allow movement on your stays. Stay means do not move an inch. Reward the dog for lack of movement, not for scooching. If you allow the dog to move, and then let him jump, you are reinforcing the opposite of what you want.

Q. Do you allow your dog to do agility in competition after he has broken his stay?

A. That is the biggest reward you can give to a dog for performing the most incorrect of behaviors. Don't let your dog run agility unless he stays.

Q. Does your trainer or friend tell you that your dog released himself before you said the release word and you just think they are being picky?

A. Watch your dog after you depart, stop at your lead-out, breathe, smile, praise, make direct eye contact with your dog, hesitate, then release without any movement on **your** part and look at the dog as he departs. Make sure your dog waits for the complete release word. Years ago my dogs were trained to move on the letter K after they had heard the letter O, because OK was my release. I proofed that my dog would not move when he hears O. I switched to using the word BREAK some years ago and am so happy I did. Ok is used to often in a casual way, and if you train with someone it is too easy to make the error of accidentally answering Ok to them while your dog is on a start-line. It is easy to change your release word to something else your dog will only hear in the context of being released from a stay. Consider it☺

Q. Do you say that you love and respect your dog, but continue to confuse and frustrate him by allowing him to break stays so that you can qualify, but get angry at him and haul him out of the ring because his breaking caused you NOT to Q?

A. Inconsistent training is unfair and it is bad dog training. The rules for staying should always be the same. If you care about your dog you will not cheat or lie to them.

Q. Do you truly believe that your start line stay behavior is NOT connected to your contact, or table problems, or your dogs overall attitude about working with you?

A. A controlled and consistent start affects your dogs' whole approach to the course. It also affects your frame of mind. It is difficult to think about a handling manouver at jump 4, when you don't know how long a lead out you will get, or when your dog might choose to run past you and help himself to the wrong

obstacles. Dogs that do not have a good understanding of stay often have contact or table problems as well as control on course issues.

Q. Are you afraid that to reinforce your stays you will lose your dogs drive off the line?

A. If you train stays correctly with reward and total consistency not punishment, your dog should happily fly off the line to you. The beginning of the course COULD be trained to actually be the fastest part of your course.

Q. Do you think you have to be mean to your dog to teach him to stay?

A. You have to be consistent and in some cases firm. You do not have to punish with physical or verbal abuse. You must always have a high rate of reward for the dog staying, or the benefits will not be obvious to the dog. If you place your dog in front of a jump 10 times, 6 of those times you should be rewarding the dog in the stay position with toys, food & praise, instead of releasing them to jump. The dog should think there is a higher percentage of chance that you are returning to their side to reward, than that they are going to leave and do an obstacle.

Q. Do you think that YOUR breed can't learn to sit still or stay?

A. It's true; some breeds can be more trying than others when teaching stays. But using your breed as an excuse for failure is just that, an excuse. You will just have to be a better dog trainer than everyone else who owns dogs of your breed.

Q. Do you truly believe you can teach your dog to stay?

A. If you don't, you won't! If 90% of your brain thinks the task is impossible, it will be just that. Trust in yourself and your dog, and train it.

Q. Do you absolutely, positively want to have a perfect stay at the start line and are you willing to take the time to teach it properly?

A. That is the bottom line. You must truly want to have a stay at the start, and see the long term benefits to taking the time to train it. No one said it would be easy, but think how good it will feel when you have the perfect start-line!