Proofing Done Properly
How to use distractions to improve your dog's understanding

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What is proofing?

Proofing is the description of a well-planned training session that helps dogs understand the parameters of behaviors and exercises. Proofing sessions give the dogs opportunities to make mistakes.   Dogs learn the consequences of mistakes, just as they learn the benefits of doing things correctly.   Handlers learn to guide their dog through the maze of right vs. wrong choices.

When is a dog ready for proofing?

Dogs were born into a world of distractions and choices.   A nursing puppy learns the consequences of staying close to mom when he's hungry (benefit: food & warmth) vs. straying away (consequence: cold & hunger).   A 12-week old puppy learns to deal with all types of distractions and consequences as he adapts to his new family and household.   He learns acceptable ways to play with toys, walk on a leash, be quiet in a crate, lay still for nail trimming, etc. As we expose our puppy to all of these new adventures we are "proofing" as we are training.

In home obedience classes we start proofing the same day we begin teachin the sit stay. We stand in front of the dog, snug leash to help the dog succeed, and talk softly, step side-to-side, etc. We help the dog do the "right" thing as we show him how to behave when exposed to these distractions.   We use praise to mark the correct behavior. Holding a sit equates to praise. Praise equals handler approval.

After a few repetitions where we help and show the dog how to behave around these mild distractions, we slowly give the dog the opportunity to learn the consequences of making the "wrong" choice. We give the dog an inch of slack in the leash. When he stands up or tries to lay down, we gently reposition him with the leash. We praise the sitting behavior. We give the dog more slack in the leash and we slowly move away from the dog. We continue to expose him to these and more distractions.

Proof early and often!

For me, proofing is an integral part of the teaching process. Proofing helps my dogs progress as quickly as they're ready and able to learn. Proofing helps me understand my dog's strengths and weaknesses.   I introduce proofing by the second or third session in which I've introduced an exercise.   I carry this philosophy into all of my training: competition obedience, agility, rally, conformation, herding, tracking, freestyle, etc.

Proofing helps me take an exercise from beginning to intermediate to advanced. Proofing helps the dog take responsibility for his part of each exercise. Proofing allows me to methodically test my dog's understanding of my expectations.

At each step of training, proofing is my way of asking my dog the following question: "Hey Fido, if say this one command word _____ (or give this one hand signal) at this distance_____, in this location_____, for this length of time_____ with the following distractions_____ -- will you be able to get the job done? Have I given you the skills you need to perform in this situation? If you can't or won't do what I ask, what will you do instead? And why?"

What's the difference between a "training" session and "proofing" session?

For my dogs, there is no difference. Proofing happens in every training session.   If I do not challenge my dogs they get bored. Boredom leads to lack of attention, lack of desire to participate in the training session, etc.

I think many people use training sessions to simply repeat behaviors the dog already knows.   The result is "pattern training" – a situation in which the dog only knows how to behave in familiar situations and settings.

Other people approach training sessions without a "plan" and they just end up practicing what's easy or comfortable.

Some trainers leave too much to chance in their training sessions.   I hear people say "Oh, I just wanted to see what he'll do."   Sorry, but a good trainer already has a very good idea of what his dog will do under certain conditions.

Training sessions that lack clear communication are all too common. Training a dog is simply having a "conversation" with a dog. There's an exchange of information that needs to happen. Proofing helps encourage this transfer of data.

What makes for clear communication?

The handler can visually picture and verbally describe their dog executing the behavior perfectly.

> *"My dog is standing next to me, paying attention to me. When I tell him to "sit" he tucks his rear forward and maintains attention on me. When I give him the signal and command to "stay" he remains sitting until I return to his side. He remains sitting until I release him."*

The handler can "see" and "describe" examples of their dog making mistakes.

> *Rock back sit. Slouching on one hip. Not sitting on the first command. Laying down. Standing up. Sniffing the ground. Dancing front feet. Spinning on his hear (to face another direction).*

The handler gives a verbal command (or signal) with congruent body language to intiate the dog's behavior.

> *"Fido, Sit"*

The handler has an action plan for each step of the exercise.   What if the dog does it correctly? How should the handler respond?   The handler should mark with a single word of praise the exact moment the dog responds to the handler's command.

> *"Good."   Handler praises dog for listening and responding.*

What if the dog does not respond properly?   If the dog is confused, the handler helps without repeating the command.

> *Handler tucks dog's rear into a sit.   Handler praises dog when dog sits to mark the proper behavior, even though the handler did all the work.*

If the dog knows what to do, but chooses not to obey, the handler gives a mild correction.   This correction should result in the dog doing the right thing, in this case sitting.

> *"Good." Handler praises dog for sitting, even though the handler had to give a correction.*

The handler waits a few seconds, then releases the dog with a consistent command and/or signal.   The handler has a clear definition of what the "release" behavior is supposed to be – and not be.

> *"Okay. With me."   Handler moves so that dog gets up. Dog remains in the vicinity of the leash, without pulling or sniffing.*

Handlers can prioritize the smaller behaviors than comprise a larger exercise. In the above example, the handler chose not to proceed with the stay portion of the exercise because the dog did not sit on command.   That would be appropriate if lack of response to a known command is indicative of the dog's lack of attention and participation in the exercise. The

handler may decide to proceed would be setting his dog up for failure; if he can't obey the simple sit command how can he be expected to stay?

On the other hand, the owner of a dog that's just learning to sit on command (large breed going through a growth spurt, small dog working through fear issues, etc.) may decide to proceed with the sit stay, knowing he will need to help the dog be successful.

Handlers must also keep track of baseline behaviors.   This allows the handler to start each new training / proofing session based on the standards set forth in the previous session.   In almost all cases these standards for measuring baseline behaviors fall into one of the following categories:

- Responsiveness to training lure or finished command or signal (Based on the dog's level of training, this is the dog's responsiveness to whatever the handler is doing to cause the dog to initiate the behavior.)

- Time (How long will the dog successfully continue the behavior?)

- Distance (How close is the handler during a sit stay? How far can the dog heel with attention? How far can the dog retrieve a dumbbell? What's the dog's distance and angle of approach to the first weave pole?)

- Location (New locations are challenging and help the dog learn to generalize behaviors.)

- Distractions (List those present in the environment as well as those directed at the dog.)

Keep written notes regarding the dog's performance, based on the above standards. This will make training sessions more productive.   Productive training sessions which yield results are more fun – for both dog and handler.

What constitutes a good proofing / training session?

Repetition #1: The handler uses the dog's previous baseline behaviors to establish a first repetition in which the dog's memory of the previous training session is triggered.   The handler does not insult the dog by asking too little, nor does he expect the dog to do more than he's capable of doing.   The handler is setting the dog up to be successful.

Repetition #2:   The handler makes a conscious decision to challenge the dog by raising one of the standards: Time, or distance, location or a specific distraction directed at the dog.   The handler is setting the dog up to make a choice. If the dog is successful, the handler knows he's not challenging the dog enough and repetition #3 will need to be a little harder.

Repetitions #3 and/or #4:   The handler should control the time, distance and distractions to help the dog make the correct decisions. This might mean making the exercise slightly easier to help the dog have a better understanding of what's expected.

A good proofing session also has the following qualities:

- A clear beginning, middle and end of each reptition.

- Setting the dog up to succeed 75% of the time.

- Setting the dog up to make mistakes 25% of the time.

- Limiting the dog's mistakes to a maximum of 2 or 3 within one repetition.

- A methodical change / increase / decrease in the variables (time, distance, locations, distractions)

- Clear communication between dog and handler (see previous section)

How to tell the dog he's made the right decision:

- A single word of praise at the moment he obeys a command.

- An additional word of praise when he makes the right choice.

- An additional word of praise when you've increased the difficulty (time, distance, location, distractions).

- One small treat to strengthen the praise.

How to tell the dog he's made the wrong decision:

- Do not react – unrewarded behavior will often extinguish itself.

How to help the dog fix a mistake when he's confused and trying:

- Maintain the same expression while you slowly move toward the dog (or dumbbell or target or obstacle, etc.). If he picks up on your "clues" give him a big reward for fixing his mistake. Praise the moment he does the right thing, then release and start over.

- Slowly begin to help the dog do the right thing (leash, food lure, signal, etc.). If he picks up on your "clues" give him a big reward for fixing his mistake. Praise the moment he does the right thing, then release and start over.

- Draw the dog a picture – help him do the behavior all the way through. Praise the moment he does the right thing, then release and start over.

What to do when the dog isn't trying:

- Make sure you have your dog's attention

- Make sure you aren't expecting too much from your dog.

- Make sure you're communicating clearly – ask a friend or instructor for their honest opinion.

- Lower the standards (make it easier) to make sure the dog understands.

- Slowly escalate corrections (whatever is appropriate for your dog, exercise and level of training). Do not become emotional when the dog becomes challenging. Dominant, manipulative and pushy dogs like to push their owner's buttons. Remember to tell the dog when he's made the right decision – even if you had to do it for him!

Skipping steps and missing opportunities:

One problem I see frequently with dogs who are past the beginning stages of training and starting to put behaviors or sequences together has to do with owners who forget to break down exercises when portions become broken – through proofing or neglect.

Some examples:

- Dog is on a sit stay. Cat walks by. Dog thinks about chasing cat but doesn't. Handler says nothing to the dog until after she's gone back and released the dog. Dog gets praised for being released – not for making the decision to ignore the cat.

- Dog has been sent to retrieve a dumbbell. Dog sniffs the ground for several seconds before picking up the dumbbell. Handler waits. Dog returns with dumbbell. Handler takes the dumbbell and praises the dog. Dog gets praised for releasing the dumbbell. (A smart handler would have praised the dog the instant the dog's mouth contacted the dumbbell…and then set up some proofing opportunities to work through sniffing.)

- Dog is anxious to go over a jump. He's been left on a sit stay. Dog fidgets the sit stay because he's anxious to jump. Handler jumps the dog and then praises the dog. The dog gets a double reward – the fun of jumping and the praise after he's come to the handler. (A smart handler realizes the importance of the sit stay and does not let it deteriorate. She goes back and praises/feeds the dog for staying. Then releases the dog to start over. She repeats this until the stay is solid. Only then does she jump the dog.)

- Dog is learning to heel with attention. Handler tells the dog to "heel" and begins walking. Handler loses the dog's attention but keeps going for several steps, then releases, feeds and praises the dog. The dog has just learned that no attention is required for heeling; in fact you get fed and praised after you walk without attention. (A smart handler would freeze, get the dog's attention back, praise and/or feed the instant attention returns and then release the dog to start over.)

- Dog is learning weave pole entrances from angles. Handler has been successful sending dog to weave poles with wires, from a distance of 6 feet at 45 degrees to the right of the first pole. In today's training session, in a familiar training location, the dog sniffs the ground and goes on past the weave poles. The handler takes the dog by the collar and uses food to lure the dog through the weave poles. The handler then praises and gives the dog the food after he exits the last pole. The dog has learned several things: 1) sniffing the ground has no consequences; 2) when you don't do something right your owner will show you how to do it with food; 3) you get food for being released. (A smart handler would have worked through the sniffing distraction by either helping or correcting the dog for the misbehavior – which was sniffing. The problem wasn't the weave poles; the problem was the dog sniffing. The smart handler would then have marked the correct behavior with a single word of praise the instant the dog correctly entered the first pole.)

- Dog is working on the drop on recall. The dog's drop is slow and inconsistent. The handler leaves the dog on a sit stay and walks to the other end of the ring. The dog sniffs the ground and the handler ignores it. The handler calls the dog. The dog waits for several seconds and then responds slowly, sniffing the ground as he comes to the handler. The handler gives the dog the drop command. The dog continues coming and sniffing. The handler walks to the dog and lures the dog down with food. The handler then backs up, calls the dog and finishes the dog. The dog is given praise and food after finishing. QUESTION? What did the dog learn? How many parts of this exercise are broken? What would a smart handler do?

- Dog is learning to work sheep in a small arena. This involves holding a sit stay while the handler opens the pen where the sheep are kept. In the dog's excitement he breaks the stay. The handler shrugs and lets the dog go beause it's "too late." QUESTION? What did this dog just learn? What would a smart handler do?

- Dog is learning to work further away from the handler on the agility course and he's struggling with the "Get out" command (move out to take the obstacle). Dog misses obstacles by coming back to handler. Handler tries again. Dog makes another mistake. Handler tries again. Dog finally does the behavior correctly. Handler does not acknowlege the dog's correct choice but goes on to give additional commands to take the next series of obstacles. Dog ends the series by coming back to the handler where it gets petted and praised and played with. QUESTION? What has the dog learned?

In conclusion….

Proofing makes sense. Proofing is fun. Proofing results in faster results. Proofing helps handlers understand what their dogs have learned. Proofing helps clarify weaknesses in training.

Proofing is hard on the humans because it requires thinking. Proofing requires a note book to keep track of baseline behaviors.

In the end, proofing is definitely worth it!

Questions? Comments? Askkathylang@aol.com

MY PROOFING / TRAINING LOG

Describe the perfect execution of the exercise

Give examples of mistakes

Describe the STARTING baseline behavior (time, distance, location, distractions)

Describe one variable to increase (time, distance, location, distractions)

REPETITION #1 – Describe everything that happened, what you did, what the dog did

REPETITION #2 – Describe everything that happened, what you did, what the dog did

REPETITION #3 – Describe everything that happened, what you did, what the dog did

REPETITION #4 – Describe everything that happened, what you did, what the dog did

REPETITION #5 (if needed) – Describe everything that happened, what you did, what the dog did

Describe the ENDING baseline behavior (time, distance, location, distractions)

Do the above for each set of 4 to 5 repetitions that you do in this proofing session.

Make some notes and observations.   Read this document prior to starting your next proofing session.

Chart your progress!