

# Session title: Ignoring food, toys, and interesting smells in the training and competition space.

Presenter: Sharon Carroll

Time: Sunday (October 8) 9am-10:40am

Location: Hall 3

**Session description:** Interesting smells, dropped food crumbs, open treat containers, and toys – these can all be very challenging for our dog to ignore.

We can try to block our dog’s access to these items, or we can use a cue to call our dog back to work, but wouldn’t it be better if our dog just continued to work in the presence of open treat containers, dropped food, and toys on the ground?

In this session we outline a systematic approach that will have your dog heeling past an open treat container or favorite toy in no time.

The key to success is helping our dog to make a choice to ignore these items. When our dog DECIDES to ignore something, the outcome is very different to when we ASK them to ignore something. This is because choosing to ignore an item is empowering and allows for full mental focus to be shifted elsewhere. Whereas being asked to ignore something may result in our dog’s visual focus returning to us and the task, but there may still be conflicting emotions and split focus/attention within the processing in the brain.

In this session we outline the steps needed to have our dog choose to ignore interesting smells, food, and toys whilst working.

Working spots: There are no pre-requisite skills for working participants but having an established loose leash walking or heeling behavior will be beneficial.

**NOTE:** The contents of this session is targeted towards dogs that compete (in person or virtual) and/or dogs that participate in training sessions/classes. This is not a protocol aimed at teaching dogs to ignore dropped food whilst out on a sniffy walk or when on “free time” in their yard at home.

## **Pre-session notes**

***(For interest only – not “required reading”)***

Unless specifically trained to ignore food, toys, and interesting smells when “working”, most dogs will have at least a portion of their attention drawn to these “distractions”; the resulting “split focus” may result in errors, missed cues, poorer quality work, or even complete disconnects.

Prior to commencing a training session, many people will actively clear the area of non-essential objects, and/or will allow their dog to investigate all the objects / items / stimuli in the space before starting work. Handlers do this to increase the likelihood that their dog will be able to fully focus on the training tasks. The problem with this approach is that it robs our dog of the opportunity to build skills for ignoring “irrelevant” stimuli. This then leaves our dog inadequately prepared for competition settings, where we commonly ask them to remain focused on us and expect them to ignore unfamiliar or interesting stimuli in the area (without having the option of investigating them first).

One strategy handler’s employ in these situations is to use a “leave it” cue. However, informing our dog not to interact with the stimulus (e.g. using a “leave it” cue) is not possible in all situations / sports (e.g. when heeling in obedience, or at other times where additional cueing will be penalized). Even at times when this approach can be used, it will likely still result in at least some degree of “split focus” (i.e. our dog may not interact with the stimulus but they may still be thinking about it).

In an effort to create an automatic behavior of not interacting with “irrelevant” stimuli during work, some handlers inadvertently create “avoidance” – in this case the dog notices the stimulus and knows that they are “not allowed” to interact with it; whilst the dog appears to remain “working” and doesn’t interact with the stimulus, they may still be experiencing “split focus” (i.e. they are still thinking about the stimulus even though they are not leaving work to interact with it). “Avoidance” may also result in the dog not wanting to physically go near the object / stimulus which may impact the precision of their other work.

Ideally though, our goal is for our dog to genuinely be able to ignore “irrelevant” stimuli in the competition space. This means that our dog needs to have neutral feelings about the stimulus (whilst working) and positive feelings about the alternative behavior (“work”). They also need to be able to focus on us and the task, without having had an opportunity to investigate any novel stimuli in the area; this can be an issue for some dogs that feel a need to investigate stimuli first before being able to ignore them.

There are several key components required to achieve the behavior of happily / comfortably ignoring “irrelevant” stimuli whilst working. These include:

- Reducing intense emotions around specific stimuli / “triggers” – i.e. reducing feelings of fear / anxiety / concern, and reducing feelings of extreme excitement, so that our dog is able to “think” clearly around specific stimuli. If our dog is experiencing intense emotions then they cannot think clearly, which means they cannot make decisions about the behaviors they perform.
- Train and practice positive interrupters and heavily reinforce our dog’s choice to disconnect their focus from a stimulus when “interrupted”. Importantly we need our dog to accept the interruption from us without experiencing conflicting feelings.
- Train alternative behaviors at an appropriate distance, and then only increase the challenge incrementally as our dog demonstrates complete comfort in ignoring the stimulus.
- Commence with "known" objects (e.g. cones, starting markers, rally signs, ring gates, etc.), then build through to less common stimuli and novel stimuli. Then increase the challenge by placing those uncommon items in challenging places – e.g. a jacket at the base of a jump wing, a small mound of light-colored sand on the ground a few metres (yards) from an obedience start peg, an unusual item on the ground near a line in agility, etc.
- When working on ignoring interesting smells, start with fairly “boring” smells (e.g. an empty water bottle, a clean item of clothing, etc.), then incrementally build through to more challenging odors (e.g. tasty food, other dog scent/urine, etc.)
- Frequently rehearsing the behavior of not interacting with novel stimuli. (Obviously in many cases we want our dog to “information gather” in order to learn about the world around them, and this involves investigating novel stimuli, however we need to ensure there is a balance between having free access to investigate objects, and not always having access to investigate objects.)

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## **Further information about dogs that leave “work” to sniff.**

At varying times, and in varying environments / situations, our dog may suddenly start sniffing the ground, or an object, or they may even start air scenting. If our dog is on "free time" when this happens, then it is likely that our dog simply perceived a stimulating scent and is keen to investigate further. Mostly we will just allow our dog

to sniff at these times, but if the scent is causing our dog to escalate to a non-beneficial level of arousal, then we will use a "positive interrupter", reward our dog for disconnecting from the stimulus, and then move away from that area.

If, however, our dog was actively training with us at the time and they disengaged from us and/or the training task to start sniffing, then we need to consider all the potential reasons for this disconnect. Common reasons include:

- A motivation issue with our training (i.e. the scent is more appealing to our dog than us or the task).
- Environmental discomfort (i.e. our dog is feeling uncomfortable / concerned / fearful due to an aspect of the environment, and hence is performing "displacement sniffing").
- Training pressure (i.e. our dog is actively disconnecting from us and/or the task, due to feelings of confusion / frustration / stress / concern, generated by the current training, or due to previously poisoned cues / environments / equipment / exercises. Again, in this instance the dog is performing "displacement sniffing").

It is important to determine which of the above is driving the sniffing behavior as this information will influence the strategies we utilize to resolve the issue. With the latter two drivers we need to address the underlying cause directly; working on a "go sniff" protocol will not reduce "displacement sniffing". However, the first driver (when a dog leaves us, or the task, purely because the scent holds more appeal), can be addressed through a multi-pronged approach. Some of the key elements will include:

- Building value for us and the task. (This may involve strategies such as working on engagement exercises, increasing / adjusting reinforcement, improving clarity in our training, etc. This increases our dog's perception of the value of the work, and hence there is a relative decrease in the value of the scent by comparison.)
- Building mental stamina to the level required for the sport / exercise / task. (This ensures our dog has the skills needed to remain engaged and fully focused for the period required, and this has the effect of reducing distractibility.)
- Building skills for ignoring stimulating distractions. (In this case smells).

During "distraction training" for scents, we need to build the challenge slowly enough that our dog is always able to take just a quick sniff, and immediately disconnect from the scent and reconnect with us and/or the task. If our dog is getting stuck sniffing for too long and is not easily interrupted, then the challenge is too high for their current skillset and we will need to reduce the overall challenge.

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In this session we will start with a brief discussion about this topic, including the practical steps we can take to improve our dog's ability to ignore food, toys, and interesting smells. We will then work with each team to build on their existing skillset in this area. The existing skills within the working spots will likely vary, hence we will probably be working on a range of different exercises.