

The Importance of Release Words for a Solid Stay

Ever wonder why your dog doesn't "stay" very well? Ever see those dogs that will "stay" even if a squirrel runs up to them? And you wish to yourself "why doesn't my dog do that?" It could be because you have not made it very clear exactly what a "stay" really is.

The human language is confusing, many words have dual meanings. Learning a foreign language can be challenging. Imagine what our dogs go through when we try to communicate with them in our language! Dogs speak mostly using body language and we as humans speak mostly verbal language. What happens when our bodies "say" something different than our voices? Or when we try to teach our dog certain commands and use different words for the same action? Or worse one word and we want it to mean different things (behaviors) at different times? Our poor dogs are confused! Imagine seeing a man walking his dog past you and your dog. And his dog is jumping and snarling at your dog. And as they walk by, he is saying to his dog "OK Rover, just leave it, leave 'em alone, that's a good boy, stay now, stay, stay, be a good boy, stay, and that's a good fella" the whole time as he is dragging his dog past. This dog may "stay" when at home in the kitchen when you hold a treat, but in this context the "stay" didn't make sense. Plus, he was giving all these other commands and verbal rewards, and the dog didn't do anything other than jump, snarl, and get dragged. How could the dog "stay" when he is being dragged? Did the owner mean "stay" as in stay with me and don't attack that other dog? That is one confused dog (and owner!).

When training our dog our words (commands) must be precise. One meaning! No grey areas. Make it very clear, black and white. One word = one behavior. How does this relate to a STAY? I personally feel it's best to teach a "wait" and a "stay" to make each behavior more precise.

A STAY is "in this spot till I come get you and release you." You may even leave the room and when you come back the dog should still be in that spot. I generally do not put my dog in a sit for an extended (long period of time) stay. I just tell her to stay and she is free to choose a sit, stand, or lay down but IN THAT SPOT until I

come get her. When I say come get her, I mean I am walking right up to her and "releasing" her from the spot. However, there are times I will tell her to "lay down" and "stay" and I do expect her to keep that position.

A WAIT is "stay in this spot until I tell you you can go" sorta like a "ready-set-go" and that release may be from a distance. In these instances, I am always in sight of the dog and may be releasing her to either come to me or go chase some sheep or go to an agility obstacle, wherever I indicate with a hand or verbal command.

However, for most people teaching a stay works well enough. BUT you MUST teach a release word if you want a really **solid** stay. Otherwise, your dog may get tired of waiting and release himself from the stay.

Whether you choose to teach both a "Wait" and a "Stay" or just a "Stay" for both behaviors, you should ALWAYS teach a release word. This way your dog understands they are to stay in place until they are released, and they do not have the option of releasing themselves. You MUST be careful to keep your dog's trust here! NEVER put your dog in a stay and go to work and leave them all day!

Release words should be a word not commonly used by other people around your dog, so they do not inadvertently release your dog from a stay. "OK" is a common release word and is a VERY bad one to use. Some better release words could be: Release, Break, or even Pizza. Make sure it is a clear word and is uncommon around your dog.

Training technique:

1. Tell your dog "Stay" and use a hand signal (typically palm towards the dog like a traffic cop)
2. Step back a step or two
3. Return to the dog and give verbal praise and a treat in place (when just starting out, give a couple small treats fed one at a time to make it really rewarding to stay there)
4. THEN toss a treat to the side and give verbal release word.

5. Repeat

6. Gradually add distance, then time, then turning your back, eventually build up to leaving the room.
7. Eventually phase out the treat when you return to the dog in place but still give the verbal praise, then TOSS a treat with the release word.

Problem solving: If your dog breaks the stay as you are backing up, you are going too fast for the dog. Just move back one step and immediately go back to the dog. Do not advance too far too fast. If your dog breaks the stay do NOT reward, do NOT reprimand, just put them back in place and repeat. Keep eye contact with the dog. As the dog becomes more successful, you can add distance, and time, and walk circles around the dog, turn your back, building up to leaving the room for just a split second, then for a longer duration. At any point a failure means you are going too fast, go back to the point the dog was successful and go slower when adding time or distance or leaving the room.

I know you are asking about Step 7, why phase out the treat when you return to the dog in place and then toss a treat for the release? Because chasing the treat is fun! And the "release" becomes the anticipated reward for staying in place. Dogs enjoy working for their rewards, and the reward of the release can be very powerful to get the dog to stay. Especially if the release means chasing food or a ball or you!

While phasing out treats is a good idea, it is not a good idea to get rid of them all together. Treats should still be used randomly to keep our dogs interested and motivated to keep on listening to us. Getting rid of treats forever may make some dogs feel like they don't need to keep listening.

Resources: Here is a video demonstrating the training:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=68mcJSAa8Ek&ab_channel=JillMarie