

What's Your Agility Focus?

By Christy Gammage, Practice Makes Pawfect

Where does your dog generally focus when doing agility? There are 2 different types of focus that we want to encourage: handler-focus and obstacle-focus. But first, let's briefly talk about what we don't want: the dog focusing on other things inside or outside the ring. "Distractions" can be other dogs or people, strange or novel looking things, or different scents. Dogs look and sniff around for many reasons: insecurity, fear, curiosity, history of rewards from other sources, instinct, or a lack of interest in what you are trying to get them to do, just to name a few.

Make a point to give your dog good experiences in new locations to build their confidence. Exposure and positive training in gradually more distracting environments will teach your dog how to focus on your requests. These outings can be a simple walk in the neighborhood while asking for sit/down/stay/come with desirable behavior being rewarded with food, play, or even sniffing. Then up the activity by going to busier environments like farmers' markets, stores, busy parks. Allow them to look around at first so they can feel

comfortable that no dangers are lurking before asking them for any behaviors. Reward when their attention is on you and you become the most important thing in the environment. If you have good focus everywhere else but on the agility field then you should make doing agility easier, more fun and rewarding for your dog.

Handler-Focus is when the dog is looking to the handler for information about what is coming up next. Some dogs are naturally more handler focused. Others become that way because the rewards are always coming from the handler. While you want a dog that is listening, you don't really want them looking at you. They need to be looking ahead to the next obstacle and beyond. If your dog is consistently looking



at you over the jumps, curving in towards you or barking at you, then you have an overly Handler-Focused dog. Looking at you over jumps can cause knocked bars. Curling towards you takes the dog off the most efficient line to the next obstacle. And barking can be a sign of frustration from lack of information.

Obstacle-Focused dogs are looking for obstacles to take. These dogs are usually intrinsically rewarded by doing agility obstacles. If there are obstacles out on the field, they may do them on their own for fun. Sounds great, right? However, too much obstacle-focus and the dog isn't listening to the directions from the handler. They see an obstacle they like or is on their line and won't respond to the handler calling the dog to another obstacle. They may keep the bars up and be fast, but off-course obstacles are a real problem.

You want Goldilocks, a good balance of a listening dog that loves to do the obstacles. Most dogs are too much one way or the other. Your job as trainer is to encourage the other type of focus.

If your dog is more Handler-Focused, then rewards should seldom come directly from you. Use target plates with a treat, a tossed or placed toy on the dog's line as their reward. Reward the dog often for doing the obstacles, not just the tricky ones, but simple jumps or lines of jumps as well. Make the dog love doing the obstacles and expect the rewards to come 'from' the obstacles, not you.

If your dog is more Obstacle-Focused, then the rewards should come from you and for listening to you. If the dog is too excited by the obstacles, start with just simple behaviors around the obstacles like sit, stay or heeling. Call the dog to you, having them come between the obstacles, and reward heavily for not taking the obstacles. Calling your dog past an obstacle without taking it is a skill you will need in competition and can be very hard for obstacle focused dogs. Set up sequences where there are multiple obstacle choices, but you direct to and reward different ones each time.

Regardless of which type of focus your dog tends towards, the dog should never be guessing about what they are supposed to do next. Use your verbals, body position, motion, and location to give your dog as much information as early as possible about where they should be going. A dog that knows where they are going will take the correct obstacle and does not need to look back at the handler so everybody wins! Happy Practicing!

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