

Cueing Turns in Agility

By Christy Gammage,
Practice Makes Pawfect

Agility courses do not go in straight lines. There are gentle arcs and sharp 180 degree turns. Since the dog doesn't have good map-reading skills, it is up to the handler to tell the dog where to go. Many times, that can be done with where you are running, pointing, or by calling out an obstacle name, using a "Come" or "Get Out" cue. Additional 'directional' verbals can better keep the dog on track.

Many people use a verbal cue for a turn that is relative to where you are in relation to the dog. "Switch" or "Back" are common verbals used to turn the dog away from you. (It doesn't matter what word you use as long as you train it and use it in a consistent manner.) Example using it: If the dog is walking/running on your left side and you want them to turn left away from you, the "Switch" verbal would be supported by turning into the dog and raising your right arm about shoulder height. Continue to rotate towards the dog as you turn 90 to 180 degrees and keep moving. Ideally the dog also turns left and you cross behind them (a Rear Cross). In this case, you use the same verbal cue for both left and right just depending on which side of the dog you are on. The cue means "turn away from me", not necessarily left or right. To turn the dog towards you, use a "Come", their name or other recall command.



Some people train "Left" and "Right" cues for the dog to turn. These directionals are from the dog's point of view, regardless of where the handler is standing. Example, if the dog is coming toward you, "Left" means they should turn to their left, not yours. While very clear for the dog once trained, some handlers have difficulty calling out the correct cue. You need good spatial awareness and the ability to mentally put yourself in your dog's position, sometime in a split second. These explicit cues work regardless of where you are in relation to the dog which is sometimes very useful.

Turn verbals can be trained by starting with spins. To train a "Right" (clockwise) spin, start by facing the dog. A treat is used to lure the dog in a small circle in front of you. If you want the dog to turn to their

right use your left hand. Allow the dog to take the treat as they complete the circle. Keep your hand position at the dog's head height or slightly lower and move slowly allowing the dog to follow the treat with their nose. As the dog gets the idea, you can lure with an empty hand and have the treat in the opposite hand for the reward when they complete the turn. Gradually raise the cueing hand and add the verbal "Right" once the dog understands. Turning the dog left (counterclockwise) would mean using your right hand to cue. Saying one word while employing the opposite hand also makes using Left/Right challenging. Work on each direction in separate training sessions the first couple of times. Expect one direction to be harder for the dog (or you) as we are all typically more adept on one side than the other.

Once the dog is spinning the correct way as cued, then add forward movement as described in the "Switch" example but using the appropriate "Left" or "Right" verbal. Walk along with the dog at your side, use your verbal command, turn into them while raising your outside arm. Reward with a treat or thrown toy from that same hand when the dog turns away from you.

Practicing a spin is also a good way to warm up your dog before harder exertion, like agility. It improves flexibility, is an effective active stretch and keeps the dog focused on you while waiting for your turn to go into the ring. Even if you use a Switch/Back cue out on course, there no reason you can't also have a Left/Right spin. It also makes a dandy party trick.

Happy Practicing!

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