

Proofing Agility

By Christy Gammage
Practice Makes Pawfect

Your dog knows how to do agility. Or do they? Prove it. Or better yet, Proof it. Proofing means practicing a cued behavior in unusual ways until the dog will perform that behavior in all kinds of scenarios. Think Dr. Suess' Green Eggs and Ham. Can they do it in a house, with a mouse, on a train, in the rain, with a goat, on a boat. This helps the dog generalize the behavior so something new in the environment won't throw them off their game. They become comfortable with you introducing new stimuli but still expecting and rewarding the correct behavior.

We do this initially when we train the behavior. We ask for the simplest form of the behavior, like "can you step over this low pole while I walk beside you". Then we add other challenges, like "can I call you to me over this pole", "can you be sent over the pole to get a treat on the other side", "can you jump the pole at an angle". Then we try the jump in the front yard instead of the back or at a different training facility. Step-by-step, we add the different variations. Now the dog will run with you over a jump, come over a jump when called, and send away from you over a jump, whether coming at it straight on or slicing at an angle over the top in normal dog training environments. The dog 'knows' how to jump.

But Proofing takes this a step further by adding unusual things to their environment. Now we ask the dog to do the jump while we are running in the opposite direction. Or with other dogs sitting around the jump. Instead of a simple bar jump, we decorate it with streamers and balloons. Will they jump for you if you are wearing an inflatable dinosaur suit?

The core of Proofing is adding distractions. Anything that will catch the dog's attention can be used as a distraction. These can be attractors, such as rewards (toys, food, play opportunities) or more worrisome things.

Begin Proofing by using the attractors. How closely can you place a desirable object and still have the dog perform the behavior? You can either reward with the visible object, or reward with something else. Can you scatter toys around the course and your dog ignore them as they run? Will they work with an open bowl of food sitting right there? What about with their buddy sitting over on the sideline?

Handler motion is a big attractor (as it should be, because we normally want the dog to respond to it). Your dog may be able to perform a behavior when you are stationary or moving in the 'normal' way. An example for your start line stay or 2-on-2-off contact: can they stay when you jog



off, wave your arms around, ignore them, turn cartwheels, toss the leash or a toy past them, and only release when you give your verbal cue? Once committed to an obstacle like weaves, can the dog finish the obstacle correctly while you run in random directions? Practice all these things to train your dog's independent obstacle performance.

Many dogs (especially herding dogs) find any motion to be distracting. Practicing with other dogs working nearby is a good start. Graduate to another handler/dog team in a vigorous tug session in the ring with you.

Be extremely cautious about using anything for proofing that may frighten the dog. If you think it might be scary, introduce it away from the agility environment, so the dog does not associate it with agility. Example: a scary outfit. Let your dog examine it, sniff it, etc. while you reward them for interacting with it. Let them see you put it on. Play and reward with the outfit on before even going out to do agility. Similarly, if you have timid dog, let them check out any decorations you put on or around the obstacles before asking them to perform. No one can focus or do their best if they are scared.

A note about timid dogs: before adding 'weird' things on the agility field, add new and novel things to their home environment. Place different household objects in unusual places, like put a pot/plant/balloon/music box/etc. in the middle of the family room. Reward them for checking it out. When they are comfortable with one thing, move it to a new location and replace it with something new. Get the dog used to novel things coming and going in the house. Next, take the dog out for positive interactions in the world at large. Never push them past what they want to do. Rewarding a dog for interacting with new things will increase their confidence and bravery.

Noise is another distractor that we often forget about. Recordings are available of sounds your dog may hear at a big event or of an obstacle that may worry or excite your dog. As with all training, start at a level that lets your dog succeed before turning up the volume.

Scent is something that seldom gets 'proofed'. Hounds and hunting dogs are specifically bred to use their nose. Train for this in daily life by heavily rewarding a dog for coming to you off a scent. Their reward may be sending them back for more sniffing. It is extremely hard to control scent as a distractor. Try training with containers of small animal litter/scat placed so the dog can't access it.

With the holidays approaching we will have ample opportunities to reuse decorations as proofing. Take those dollar store items and make your agility course more fun and more interesting for your dog. Safety first, but fun and proofing can be a close second.

As you can see, proofing can be taken as far as you wish. Brave dogs may not need as much, but all dogs should be proofed for the things you expect where you want them to perform their best. Word to the wise, expect the unexpected and proof some more. Better Practice.

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