

# Trick Yourself Into Agility

**By Christy Gammage, Practice Makes Pawfect**

Dog Agility and trick training have a lot in common. A great way to hone your overall training skills is to teach your dog tricks. All dog training is essentially trick training, even if “Stay” and “Come” aren’t high on the entertainment scale. Whether the goal is Sit, Bow or Weave, to communicate with and motivate your dog to do what you want is the definition of dog training. You learn what motivates your dog, how to break things into understandable pieces and how to keep your dog’s interest in working with you. Tricks are usually thought of as fun, not serious work, so most people don’t put a lot of pressure on the dog or themselves during the process.

While all tricks can be fun, some are foundational to agility skills. One of the first ‘tricks’ is to teach your dog to step or jump up on a platform. Think of the dogs (or tigers) jumping up onto a decorated perch in a circus. It is often used as a definitive place for the animal to stay while other things are going on around them. In agility, the 3’x3’ Table is used as a ‘pause’ obstacle or at the end of the course to stop the clock. The mental and physical challenge is going from all out running to a stopped position on the table.

Progressing from getting on a platform is the ability to “Walk the Plank”. This helps the dog learn where all their feet are since often the plank can be narrow. When low, the dog can just step up onto the plank from the ground. As the plank gets higher, you need ramps to get up to the horizontal section. Ta Da! You have an agility Dog Walk. In agility the lower portions of the ramps are yellow



and the dog must touch the yellow as they exit. This ensures the dog does not jump from too high and risk injury.

Another trick that helps dogs learn Proprioception (knowing where all their body parts are) is backing up. Teaching the dog to back onto a different feeling surface or a slanted platform helps them manipulate their back legs independently. While there is no requirement in agility for the dog to back up, it is often used when teaching a 2-on-2-off position on the bottom yellow portions of the contact.

Teaching your dog to spin left and right is a great party trick. Doing it while you are in motion can lead to some interesting doggy dance patterns. It also can be used as a stretching warm-up before asking them for more strenuous activity. If you purposefully label the left and right spins with different verbals, you can expand these cues into your handling while on an agility course. Use these directional cues to tell the dog which way to turn after a jump or to turn away from you towards the next obstacle.

Leg Weaves, where the dog weaves between your legs as

you walk, teaches your dog a similar motion to the agility weave poles in competition. However, you will still need to teach the dog about weave poles, specifically the entry and exit. Even so, Leg Weaves are another good way to warm up the dog while waiting for your turn to run a course.

Jumping through a hoop is a quintessential party trick. Jumping over your raised leg is also a cute trick. Obviously, agility also has a lot of jumping over bars and through a ‘tire’. When teaching either the hula hoop or leg jumping, you start with it on the ground and reward the dog for going through or over. Then you can gradually raise the ‘jump’ when the dog understands the task.

Even when the trick has no direct application to agility, just training your dog in a fun way with lots of rewards will strengthen your bond and lead to further successes in whatever you tackle. Better Practice!

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