

# Agility is Just Routine

By Christy Gammage,  
Practice Makes Pawfect

How comfortable are you in your normal routine? Routines can be thought of as a series of actions or behaviors performed consistently. You know what is coming next and how you will handle it. You don't have to engage your brain much. Muscle-memory takes over and your mind is free to continue with other thought processes. Routine is easy. Routines can make the right (or the wrong) thing easy. Dogs are just like humans in this respect. Let's leverage the power of routine in our agility journey.

First, let's have a routine that gets us up and practicing our agility skills. This can be having treats prepped and already in your training pouch, sneakers and do toy ready by the door, equipment set out in the yard or spare room for the next training session. Now every day before breakfast or at X o'clock, we spend 3 minutes on a light warm-up, 3 minutes on a known skill, 5 minutes on a new skill and a fun play session to wrap it up. No muss, no fuss and done in 15 minutes.

Time for class. Have a routine for loading dog and necessities into your



Morning Agility



Loading into Car



Afternoon Agility Class



Tug & Chat with Instructor

vehicle. When you get to class, do your setup before bringing your dog out. Your dog will learn through routine that they can wait in the car. Have a plan before letting your dog out of the car. Will you go potty them, or do they need to settle in before they can potty? Always enforce your rules for loose leash walking, waiting quietly at doorways, etc, especially at the beginning. Spending time and effort at the beginning will make those things part of the routine. Don't let bad manners invade your routine.

Your turn in class is approaching. Your

needed. Guess what! That same routine will benefit you at a trial.

During dog training, you will have lots of 'micro' routines like setting the dog up for a sequence or how you reward them for their efforts. If the dog knows the routine of setting up before a jump, your lead out and the release, then they are comfortable with what is expected. You can build some variation into these micro routines (like jogging to your lead-out or flapping your arms) and still preserve the dog's comfort in knowing what is going to happen. If the dog knows where and how the reward is

routine should include having already pottied your dog, warming them up, having your rewards ready in plenty of time so you can be stepping into the ring to take your turn as the previous dog leaves. With that routine your dog knows it is their turn to work after potty and warm-up. Once your turn is done, arrange a nice cool down if

going to be given, then they know where to drive to and what to expect. Consistent routines avoid confusion.

What is your routine between sequences? Do you let the dog wander off and amuse themselves or do you give the dog some job to do while you reset equipment or talk to your instructor? Whatever it is, that becomes the thing the dog will do once you take your focus away from them. (Hint: never let the dog disconnect from you and wander away. When not interacting with the dog, put them on a tug, on a leash, in a stay or in a kennel.) Don't let bad habits invade your routine.

We want to use routines to build good habits in ourselves and our dogs. And we use routines so the dog understands what is going to happen next so they can feel more confident and avoid uncertainty and worry. Good routines take daily, conscious effort to establish. Habits are done automatically. One study determined the average time to form a habit was 60+ days (assuming something was done daily). Planning what your routine should be will help you cultivate those good habits that move your agility skills forward with a happy, confident dog. Better Practice!

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agility@gammage.org

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