

## Teaching the Auto Check-in - Suzanne Clothier

You can do this anywhere, anytime – sitting on the steps to your house, while watching TV, in the backyard, the bathroom, the kitchen, anywhere. Reinforce all unprompted check-ins!

**The goal for you:** become unfailingly attentive to & aware of the dog; to heavily reinforce any voluntary “check-in”

**The goal for the dog:** when faced with a choice, to voluntarily check-in with the handler *without prompting*, roughly every 5-7 seconds. This is easily achieved in a matter of minutes unless the distraction is too great. If necessary, modify the intensity, duration or distance relative to the stimulus.

- Stand (or sit) quietly with neutral expression and body posture, though attentive to the dog.
- **No tension** on leash. Leash tension not only increases arousal but also provides dog with information as to the handler’s location; without this, the dog must remain attentive to and track the handler in new ways.
- Give the dog a small area (roughly that allowed by perhaps 2-3’ of lead) that the dog may explore that and only that if he likes.
- Stand and wait for the dog to turn back to the handler. Be patient! Several minutes may pass. This is okay as long as the dog is not getting into any trouble. *Resist the urge* to call the dog.
- When dog **voluntarily** seeks eye contact with the handler, the handler becomes **very** excited & animated while providing *generous & prolonged reinforcement*: initially *at least 5-15 seconds of continuous reinforcement* using **high value food treats** paired with verbal praise.
- Have at least 1 treat per second already counted out and in your hand.
- Deliver each treat with a short, upbeat phrase – i.e., “What a great dog!” “Thanks for checking in!” “You are incredible!” etc.
- Once the reinforcement has been given, the dog is free to resume look back at whatever was of interest.
- Then the cycle begins again, with the dog checking in at 5-7 seconds.

Watch for the rapid improvements in the dog’s response. It might take 2 minutes for the first glance, but only 45 seconds for the second, and 20 for the third, for example. Very quickly, dogs begin checking in at the desired 5-7 second interval.

**How far to be from any distractions?** My basic rule of thumb for the “right” distance from a distraction is this: the dog can successfully and readily split his attention between the handler and other things. You will see evidence of this when the dog can quickly respond to a verbal signal and/or the ability to perform the auto check-in at the desired interval (5-7 seconds) *without prompting*. If the dog can’t split his attention, back off to a distance where he can.

The goal is not to have the dog focused on the handler and ignoring the environment, but splitting his attention between handler and environment *without being reactive or becoming aroused*. The world is an interesting place, and I feel strongly that dogs should be free to enjoy watching it **provided** they are still responsive to any signals by the handler, and do not escalate into reactive behavior or too much arousal.

Should the dog fail to check in at the 5-7 second mark, **passively** prompt his attention by stepping into or out of the dog’s peripheral vision, scuffing a foot or taking a step away. If you need to, actively direct

the dog's attention back to you with a specific command, a touch on his body or both. While an occasional prompt might be necessary, if it happens more than rarely, re-evaluate the situation. You may need to back away to a great distance, or lower the intensity of the distractions.

Of course, should the dog fail to respond or escalate to an undesirable degree, appropriate restraint/management should be used to regain the dog's attention. Do what you have to keep the dog and all others safe.

Very important that this is a **voluntary** check-in by the dog and not a prompted or lured response such as the "watch" command so often taught. *Voluntary* behaviors that are reinforced are, in my experience, stronger and more reliable than prompted or lured behaviors.

Very rapidly, dogs learn that it is highly beneficial on a number of levels to check-in with their handler. It is not simply the food reward that makes this so powerful for the dog, though food rewards certainly help. What the dogs apparently find deeply reinforcing is the **social contact with the handler**, so that verbal praise, a smile, touch – all these become valuable reinforcers even in the complete absence of food rewards. I encourage handlers to use a variety of reinforcers but especially interaction and gentle, pleasant physical contact.

When teaching the dog to check-in, be sure that it is voluntary, not prompted by calling the dog's name or making a noise to attract his attention. (That is a separate exercise!) If the check in is prompted, I find it does little to shift the dog's motivation and/or internal state – it's just an interrupter that then give the handler a chance to reinforce the dog looking at them. Often, as soon as the handler stops maintaining the behavior, the shifts right back into what he was doing and/or thinking prior to being interrupted by "look at me" or "watch me" or anything else.

When the dog **voluntarily** chooses to shift his attention from (whatever) to his handler, there is a profound difference in terms of emotional modulation – the dog himself has *chosen* to seek the social interaction with the handler instead of tuning them out in favor of an outwards draw by whatever is upsetting, attracting or distracting him.

Think of the difference you would feel if intensely watching your favorite dog video and having your name called by someone nearby, versus the process & feeling of watching that video but even as you're doing that, *choosing* to stop watching in order to give your attention voluntarily to someone. One is a response to an *external* prompt; the other is driven by an *internal, self-directed choice*.

The dog being prompted vs. an auto check-in may *look* like the same behavior, but in my experience, they are worlds apart, especially in the resultant behavior from the dog even in the face of what they find difficult or arousing. I've worked with countless dogs who had been carefully taught "watch me" or "look at me" but that had only moderated their behavior a tiny bit. The handler has to maintain the behavior because the dog is not offering it, the dog may respond but as soon as the behavior ends, his attention whips right back to where it was before, often without much change. Teach the auto check-in as a volunteered behavior, and you can go quite far, quite fast because the dog is in a different place on so many levels.

Teaching an auto check-in is not difficult, and goes very fast and I think one of the best skills to be taught to any dog.