

Teaching your dog “Directional Control” for the Urban Search and Rescue badge

Teach the dog that being on the mat/target has the highest probability of getting rewarded:

1. Pick something to use as a training mat (you’ll eventually need 3 or 4 of them, but they can be different.) This can be a lightweight dog bed, towel, bath mat, anything you can easily pick-up and move. This could also be a wooden platform or anything you can send the dog to target. But I’ll use “mat” in these directions.
2. Have your treats ready and place the mat on the floor. Position yourself so that the dog is likely to get on the mat. If the dog normally sits or stands in front of you, then that’s where you should put the mat. With toy dogs, you could start this on a table so you don’t have to bend as much. We want to set the dog up for success so he starts to figure out that being on the mat brings a flow of treats.
3. When the dog is on the mat, feed him one treat after another while telling him what a smart dog he is. Make it really rewarding for the dog. After about 5 treats, stop and pick-up the mat. You’ll probably have to pull it out from under the dog or ask him to move and quickly pick it up before he gets back on it.
4. Repeat steps 2 and 3 several times. Put the mat in a different place on the floor each time you put it down. If indoors, you can practice this in several different rooms. If you have different mats, do these steps with each one, so the dog learns that they all “work” the same way. Using a variety of mats will help with the transition later to whatever surface the dog might encounter in the field.
5. Once the dog is reliably and quickly diving onto the mat as soon as you put it down while in a low distraction environment (such as inside your home or a quiet room) move outside. For most dogs, this will increase the distraction level. You can start in a fenced area or put the dog on a leash. Again repeat steps 2 and 3, moving the mat each time.
6. Now that the dog is obsessed with the mat(s), you can start working on distance. Toss or place the mat a little farther from you. Go to the dog to reward him while he stays on the mat. If the dog brings the target back to you, simply don’t reward that and replace the mat/target. The dog will quickly learn that bringing the target to you gets him nothing, but lying on it brings rewards.
7. When the dog is comfortable with more distance while in front of you, start tossing the mat to the side, but don’t turn your body to face it right away. You can start to use your arm/hand to point to the mat. This will begin the association between the mat placement and your hand signal.

Teaching the dog directional signals:

8. Next, have a friend help you place the mat for more distance (or put your dog on a stay while you place it.) Start with the dog sitting next to you in heel position. Point your arm/hand to the mat that is placed within a distance the dog is able to do easily. Don’t try for too much distance too fast! The dog should look at the mat you are indicating while you hold his collar till you are ready to send him. Pick a “send” cue to let the dog know he should now go to the mat. This can be something like “go!” or “out” or “Target.” When the dog reaches the mat, go over and reward the dog while he is on the mat.
9. Now you can start using 2 or more mats. Start with them just out of your reach. Have the dog sitting next to you in heel position. Point to a mat, wait for the dog to look at it, then use your send cue to send the dog to that mat. Go to the dog and reward. If the dog goes to the wrong mat, just wait. Do nothing and see if the dog will figure it out. If not, call him back and try again from the sitting at heel position. Do not worry if the dog makes a mistake. It will help clarify the exercise for him. If the dog moves before you tell him too, say “oops!” and start over. The dog needs to learn to wait for your cue, because later, he needs to wait on a mat till you tell him to move to another mat.
10. Once the dog is able to correctly go to any mat you indicate every time (no mistakes) with the mats just out of your reach, then you can gradually add distance. You will still be going to the dog each time he gets it right (you want him to stay on the mat till you get there.) When you can send the dog to a single mat (out of at least 3 others) and he gets it right 10 out of 10 times at a distance of at least 15’, then you can progress.
 - a. You’ll be adding a new cue now to teach the dog to stop when you tell him to. Just as the dog gets to the mat, give your “stop” cue. This can be something like “stop”, “halt”, or “freeze.” Of course, the dog will stop because he has reached the mat, but through many

repetitions, the dog will start to associate the stop cue with the act of stopping. This will come in handy later when there is no mat on the rubble pile to indicate where the dog should stop. You can also practice the stop cue while walking the dog on-leash. Use the cue just before you stop or the dog gets to the end of the leash.

Moving between mats:

11. Now you want to teach the dog to move between the mats. Move the mats in again so they are just out of your reach and spaced evenly around you. Send the dog to a mat just as before, but instead of going to the dog to reward him, indicate with a hand signal, the mat next to him and use your send cue to get him to move to that mat. When the dog changes mats, go to him and reward him on that mat. If the dog doesn't move, try putting the mats closer together, or go back to repetitions of step 9 to help the dog firmly understand the hand signal and go cue. Do several repetitions of the dog first going to one mat, then moving to a different mat for the reward. As you practice this, work on:
 - a. Getting the dog to look at the next mat before you use your send cue.
 - b. Have the dog wait for the send cue before he moves. If he anticipates, just say "oops!" and start over. He will quickly figure out the only way to get the reward is to wait for your signal.
 - c. Be random in which mat you send the dog to each time. Start at an easy level where the dog moves to the next mat over. But work up to the dog being able to cross your path to go to a mat on the opposite side of you.
 - d. Do this exercise in various locations.
 - e. Continue to use your stop cue just as the dog reaches the correct mat.
12. When you can send the dog between any 2 mats, add in another mat. Now the dog needs to move from mat #1, to mat #2 to mat #3 before you go to him to deliver the reward. The mats are still very close to you. Do several repetitions, but now, sometimes you reward after only 1 mat, other times you reward after 2 mats and most frequently, you reward after 3 mats. Continue to work on points a, b, c, d & e above. You can change up the items you use as "mats" too. This way, the dog learns to go to whatever you point toward.
13. When the dog is successfully moving between 3 mats correctly 10 out of 10 tries, add in having the dog go to a 4th mat.
14. When the dog can go to any 4 mats in a row, NOW you can start to build the distance again. Keep the dog successful by not trying to add too much distance too fast. Also keep in mind that if it's hot, your dog could overheat quickly when doing a lot of running between the mats.

Add height:

15. Rubble piles and disaster scenes aren't flat. The dog will need to be able to jump up onto a target area. You can use your mats to help the dog learn to do this by placing them on raised surfaces like an agility table, chair, picnic bench seat or top, in the back of an open van, any safe raised surface the dog can reach. To let the dog know you want him to jump up, teach him an "up" cue. Most people use "hup" but you could use "jump" or "on" or whatever. Starting with the dog near the raised object, signal the mat as you have before, use your "send" cue and immediately your "up" cue. So it could sound like "go hup!"
16. Gradually add distance between you and the raised target area. Use your "up" cue before the dog gets to where he needs to jump up.

Vary the "mats"

17. A disaster response dog is not going to have "mats" to go to on a rubble pile. So you'll want to teach the dog to go in whatever direction you indicate until you say stop. With all the prior practice, this should not be hard to do. You simply set-up the game as though there ARE mats. Send the dog to the "invisible" mat (which is someplace not far from you) give your stop cue and go reward the dog when he stops. It shouldn't take long for the dog to transition from a visual signal to using only your cues.