FOUNDATION SKILLS

Hand Targets (HT)

Hand Targets are one of my favourite games to play. It is so simple that most people don't put much value into it, but it has so many uses. You can give this behaviour a verbal cue if you like but presenting your hand is already a cue for your dog and you would hardly chop off your wrist and present your hand somewhere else in the room. However, I recommend playing with and without a verbal cue, some dogs can focus better if there is a verbal cue as well. Favourite cues are "touch" or "bump".

Reasons to play HT:

- A great way to change your dog's emotional state by changing their physiology
- It's the foundation of so many other behaviours
- A great tool to refocus your dog to you

What you'll need:

- Your dog on a leash
- Your dog's favourite treats
- Your mobile phone on a tripod to video your session
- A timer – make sure to keep sessions short
- You and your dog should be familiar with the IYC game

Start to play this game in an environment with no distractions.

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Step-by-step-guide:

1. Get the mechanics right

In this first step of the game, you will practice the mechanics of this game without our dog. How you deliver the treat is important in this game.

a. Have a few treats in your left hand – this will be your cookie hand.
b. Hold out your right target hand, palm facing the imaginary dog and held firm.
c. Your cookie hand is above your dog's head – this is where IYC comes into play.
d. When your imaginary dog comes over to investigate your target hand, cup your target hand and let a treat from your cookie hand drop into the cup hand from above.
e. If the treat falls to the ground, say your "search" cue for your dog to get it. This maintains clear IYC criteria.
f. Practice with your other hand. Left hand is now target hand and right hand is cookie hand.

2. Bring your dog in

Once you are comfortable with stage 1 and your mechanics, bring your dog into the game.

a. Have a few treats in your left hand – this will be your cookie hand.
b. Hold out your right target hand, palm facing up and slightly cupped.
c. Your cookie hand is above your dog's head – this is where IYC comes into play.
d. When your dog comes over to investigate your target hand, let a treat from your cookie hand drop into the cup hand from above.
e. If the treat falls to the ground, say your "search" cue for your dog to get it. This maintains clear IYC criteria.
f. If your dog ignores your target hand, put it behind your back and offer it again when your dog is attentive.
g. Once you have rewarded your dog for two or three investigations, present your firm target hand, facing your dog.
h. Wait until your dog is touching your target hand with their nose.

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i. Reward the touches as you did the investigation by cupping your target hand and let a treat fall in from your cookie hand.
j. Your dog needs to predict where the target hand is, make sure that you hold your hand firm in position, resist to move your hand into your dog's face. Let them make the choice to move towards your hand.
k. Break the session of with a game of tug or some running around.
l. Repeat the above steps with your other hand.
m. Ask for more touches before rewarding.

3. Put a cue on it

When your dog is reliably touching your hand when you present it, it's time to put your verbal cue on it. Be mindful of your mechanics here, as they are very important. We are using the new cue/Old cue method. The old cue is you presenting your hand, the new cue is your verbal cue.
With your dog ready to play, say your verbal cue e.g. "bump", wait 2 seconds and present your hand like you did in the previous steps of the game. When your dog is bumping your hand, reward them as previously by letting the cookie drop into your cupped hand.

4. Bring movement in

In this stage we bring some movement into our hand targets. Only progress to this stage when you are comfortable with your mechanics.

a. Offer your right hand to target and reward 4 – 5 touches.
b. Run with your dog to a new room.
c. Offer your left hand to target and reward 4 – 5 touches.
d. This will bring or keep your dog's arousal level up and might make it a bit harder for them to target your hand properly.
e. Only reward the touches that are within your criteria.
f. Play with and without verbal cue.

5. Continue to raise criteria

Now that you and your dog are professionals in this game, it is time to raise your criteria and ask for firmer touches. Work up to multiple nose touches.

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Remember to keep your hand firm and still, this will ensure you are successful with this step.
Build up to 25 – 30 Hand Targets. With and without verbal cue.

Advancing the game:

Once your dog's HTs are solid, you can add some distractions from your distraction list. Start at the lower end of your list and build up to a distraction level 8 – 9.

Close your eyes and feel how strong the touches are.

Integrate IYC into the game – ask your dog for Hand Targets while you hold an open hand of treats in the other hand.

Always look at your dog's T.E.M.P and break up your sessions with an arousing game of tug or chasing you!

If in these advanced stages your dog is not able to do a touch, move further away from the distraction or leave your hand closed when you integrate IYC.

Play with and without a verbal cue and take note of any difference in your dog's response.

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Daily Use:

I love Hand Targets; they are part of every day. You can use them to teach behaviours like walking by your side, guiding your dog to a place, teaching a stand – the sky is the limit.

They are also a great tool to gauge your dog's focus on the work with you. A dog who can't do a simple Hand Target might be over- or under-aroused – it's a great measure to evaluate current emotions in your dog.

Play this game daily. It will create a great connection with your dog, you can see where they are emotionally at and it's an easy way for your dog to earn reinforcement.

When you put a cue on this behaviour, make sure that you refrain from using the verbal cue to "get your dog's attention" when they are distracted. Present your hand and if your dog is not able to touch your hand in the presence of a distraction – move them further away and try again.

Checklist:

1. Have you videoed and reviewed your session?
2. Have you kept sessions short and fun?
3. Are your treat delivery mechanics clear and precise?
4. Look at your dog's T.E.M.P (Tails, Ears/Eyes, Mouth, Posture)
5. Have you played this game in different environments?
6. Did you have a nice game of tug or game of chase you as balance breaks?

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