



Canine Consent Checks

“**Choice is a primary reinforcer.**” What does this mean? Reinforcers are things in your dog’s life that they find rewarding and desire more of. “Primary reinforcers” refer to those reinforcers that are desirable by instinct because they are important to survival, like food, water, and shelter. Studies show that having **control and choice over their environment is as rewarding for dogs as food and treats**. Choice is a cornerstone of positive reinforcement-based dog training and can be applied with great results to daily interactions with your dog.

Our favorite way to help a dog exercise choice is to employ **Consent Checks**. This simple tool will allow your dog to better communicate with you and give you greater insight into what they do and do not find enjoyable in your interactions.

1. **Pick an interaction with your dog.** An easy one is petting gently on the chest or side, or otherwise interacting with touch.
2. **Engage in the interaction for 3-5 seconds, then stop and retract your hands** for 5 seconds. What does your dog do?
3. **If your dog reengages**, continue the interaction (repeat step 2)!
4. **If your dog disengages**, respect their choice and don’t reengage. Instead, try a different activity, like offering a treat or a toy. Or, give them space.

Signs of reengaging

Moving towards you
Reinitiating touch
Nudging or licking
Rubbing body against you
Leaning into touch
Gently pawing you

Signs of disengaging

Not moving towards you
Moving away
Looking away
Lip licking
Leaning away during touch
Exposing belly

Why are consent checks so important? They allow dogs to have **control over their environment and choice in their interactions**. It is easy to forget that we control every interaction our dogs have with their environment! Finding ways to provide them choice and control in their daily lives as well as to respect their body language signaling they want to continue or end an interaction can help prevent them from escalating their behavior. Practicing consent checks **often makes dogs more likely to solicit interactions from you**, especially shy or fearful dogs that feel safer knowing they will not be forced into an interaction. Think of a personal relationship; are you more likely to feel trusting and comfortable with a person who does not listen when you ask for space, or with someone who respects your boundaries?

Pro tip: this is a great tool not only for dogs, but for animals of all species!

For more information and behavioral support, contact our behavior department at www.eastbayspca.org/behaviorhelp