



Pattern Games: A game changer for your dog?

If you have dipped a toe into the world of “clicker training,” you may be familiar with how to train behaviors. Often the process is fairly straightforward; the dog offers the behavior, you click and treat. The dog learns that any time they offer that specific behavior it will be followed by a click and a treat, and they offer that behavior more often.

But there is a whole subset of training which has emerged over the past decade that adds a twist to this training conversation. The concept of “Pattern Games” were developed by trainer Leslie McDevitt and are a type of training exercise which creates a repetitive “pattern” of behavior, a loop that repeats over and over as the dog and trainer move through the environment.

These repetitive and predictable patterns can have a huge impact on the dog’s perception, both in how their nervous system regulates their body, and how they feel about distractions in the environment. There’s a bunch of cool science behind this, and MANY different pattern games to choose from depending on your goals!

There are a number of reasons that pattern games can be helpful for your dog:

- **Predictable:** Not knowing what will happen next is a huge contributor to dogs feeling anxious or overexcited. For a fearful or vigilant dog, the neighborhood park might be scary or overwhelming. But if they know and enjoy a type of pattern game, you can use that game to help the park feel more predictable, and therefore less worrying or frantic. A dog who barks at other dogs might be doing so because they don’t know how to regulate their fear or frustration. Pattern games offer a predictable and easily practiced way to regulate those feelings, thus decreasing the barking and lunging that can accompany them.
- **Simple:** Pattern games are VERY simple procedures! This not only makes them easy for your dog to learn and to practice, but it means that the repetitions are less likely to fall apart when distractions are introduced.
- **Repetitive:** Muscle memory is an often-overlooked aspect of training! Habits form through repetition, and the momentum of the repetition inherent in all pattern games can make them useful for getting your dog into a familiar rhythm when unpredictable things happen around them. These patterns can become almost automatic. When a dog is “in the zone” focusing on a pattern game, the environment becomes more like background noise. *Repetitive motions can also be calming—one of the reasons that pattern games are a preferred tool for training reactive behaviors!*

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- **Engaging.** By definition, the dog is engaged with you while practicing these pattern games! Because of this, pattern games can be a great way to regain or keep your dog's attention in distracting situations once you have practiced them.
- **Assessing.** Since consent and choice are baked into pattern games, they are very useful assessment tools for how your dog is feeling in a given moment. Especially for those handlers working on behavior modification, noticing if, when, and how a dog chooses to engage with a known/well practiced pattern game while adding new triggers or distractions can give you valuable data.
- **Enjoyable.** Pattern games are supposed to be FUN for you and your dog! Which is one of the reasons that they are often used in training to create new and more positive associations to previously scary or overexciting stimuli.

So what do pattern games look like in practice?

There are SO many different kinds of pattern games. Trainer Leslie McDevitt coined the term, and her Control Unleashed book series is a comprehensive overview of how to teach your dog these games, as well as how to use them to assist various training goals.

If you are looking to explore pattern games in more depth, here are some resources we would suggest:

Look for dog trainers with the credential "CCUI" (Certified Control Unleashed Instructors)

- Cory Abshear, CCUI <https://www.dog-trek.net/> (East Bay)
- Anna Wong, CCUI <https://www.muttshavefun.com/> (East Bay)

[Control Unleashed: From Reactive to Relaxed by Leslie McDevitt](#)

[Control Unleashed Webinar and Online Learning Collection](#)

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