

Look At That or Engage/Disengage



“Engage/Disengage” and “Look at That” are similar games that we use to help dogs who get overexcited, reactive, or anxious. These skills are a fantastic way to help your dog build an alternate response to distractions and triggers.

Why Use Engage/Disengage or Look at That?

- **Confidence Building:** Helps your dog feel less anxious around triggers.
- **Focus Shift:** Encourages your dog to look to you for guidance after noticing something interesting or concerning.
- **Calm Responses:** Replaces reactivity with calm observation.

When to Use These Games

- **Walks:** For calmly acknowledging other dogs, people, or passing vehicles.
- **New Environments:** To help your dog feel more comfortable and focused.
- **Training Classes:** To reduce distractions and maintain engagement.

Before Starting Either of These Training Games

- **Minimize Exposure:** Reduce the number of times your dog experiences triggers as much as possible given your home environment. Block views, hide, turn and walk the other direction, whatever is needed to prevent a response.
- **Find a High Value Reward:** You'll want to use your highest value reward for these exercises, something your dog may not get in other situations. Think freeze dried liver, hot dogs, string cheese, etc!
- **Set Up Your Training Environment:** The more control you have over the environment and the trigger, the more likely you can have an effective training session.

Look At That

Look at That is a pattern game from the Control Unleashed system created by Leslie McDevitt. The goal is to have your dog report new things in the environment and let you know they are there!

The main difference from Engage/Disengage is that you work using a neutral item to learn the cue before generalizing to more distracting triggers. With Look At That, you also ask your dog to look, rather than waiting for them to notice on their own.

Level 1: Neutral Target

- a. Hold an uninteresting item behind your back.
- b. Present the item to your dog at a distance of 4-5 feet.
- c. Mark using a “yes!” or click as soon as the dog looks at the item. Timing is key, try to mark within 2-5 seconds of your dog looking at the item. Give your dog a treat!

- d. Repeat by pulling the item behind your back and then presenting it again in different locations in front of your dog. Your dog should start looking at the item and then looking back at you in anticipation of the marker/treat. You can also hold the item out for a longer time, or place the item on a surface.
- **Level 2: Add the Cue**
 - a. Once your dog is easily looking at and away from the trigger, you can add your cue. Use anything that feels good: “Look at That,” “What’s That?”, “Who’s That?” are some common suggestions.
 - b. Present the neutral item as before. Say your cue and wait for your dog to look at the object and then back at you.
 - c. Mark with “yes!” or a click as soon as your dog looks at you. Give your dog a treat.
 - d. Repeat 10-20 times.
- **Level 3: Generalize**
 - a. As your dog starts to respond to the cue by immediately looking at you, you can start generalizing to different triggers. Start with other neutral objects and work towards slightly more distracting triggers.
 - b. Work in different environments, increasingly more stimulating.
 - c. When your dog is consistent you can get closer to triggers (1-2 steps).

Engage/Disengage

Engage/Disengage is a game by Alice Tong- you can see her handout [here](#) or on the next page! It works well when you can’t control your environment or see unavoidable triggers. It doesn’t involve a lot of pre-work so you can start using this tactic almost immediately.

Tips for Success

- **Distance Matters:** Start at a distance where your dog can notice the trigger without becoming excited or stressed. The calmer your dog remains, the better this exercise will work.
- **Keep Sessions Short:** Limit initial sessions to 5-10 minutes to avoid overstimulation.
- **Watch Body Language:** If your dog seems tense, increase the distance from the trigger and give them a break.
- **Be Consistent:** This pattern should be repeated every time your dog sees a trigger. If you are not prepared to train in certain situations, make sure your dog is not exposed to their triggers.
- **High-Value Treats:** Use special treats your dog finds irresistible to maximize their focus and enthusiasm.

Resources

[Leslie McDevitt - Look at That Deep Dive](#)
[Charleston Animal Society - Engage/Disengage](#)
[Bravo Dog - Engage/Disengage Primer](#)
[Karen Pryor Academy - Engage/Disengage](#)
[Peach On A Leash - Look at That for Reactivity](#)

THE ENGAGE-DISENGAGE GAME

A training game for dogs who are FEARFUL, ANXIOUS, or FRUSTRATED around a specific trigger such as another dog, person, or sound. The goal is to first decrease the dog's fear/anxiety/frustration and then to teach the dog a new safe and appropriate behavior to do instead.

PREP:

- ☐ High value treats
- ☐ Clicker (or verbal marker)
- ☐ Humane harness or collar
- ☐ Practice fast u-turns by luring your dog with a treat on his nose, or tossing "find-it" treats on the ground as you both walk away quickly in the opposite direction.

- ☐ Take a break if you see subtle stress signals (displacement behaviors) such as excessive lip licking, yawning, or scratching.



PLAY FOR 1-5 MINUTES. TAKE A BREAK. REPEAT.

LEVEL 1: ENGAGE

- 1**  Start at a safe distance away from the trigger, where your dog is not reacting. Be quiet and still so your dog notices the trigger on his own.
- 2**  At the precise moment your dog ENGAGES by looking at the trigger, CLICK!
- 3**  When your dog turns his head towards you after the click, feed a treat.
If your dog reacts or is not turning back to you after the click, move further away from the trigger to reset at an easier distance.

LEVEL 1 GOAL:

To do at least 3-5 repetitions in a row at the same distance before moving on to LEVEL 2. A successful repetition is when your dog immediately turns back to you after the click.

If the trigger is moving or changing in intensity, keep playing LEVEL 1 until your dog has calmly looked at (or engaged with) the trigger from every direction. Then move on to LEVEL 2.

LEVEL 2: DISENGAGE

- 1**  Let your dog notice the trigger again, but now wait 1-5 seconds to see if he will offer to LOOK AWAY from the trigger on his own.
If your dog is fixating on the trigger for longer than 5 seconds, GO BACK to LEVEL 1.
- 2**  At the precise moment your dog DISENGAGES by looking away from the trigger, CLICK!
- 3**  After the click, feed a treat.
If your dog reacts or is not turning back to you after the click, move further away from the trigger to reset at an easier distance.

LEVEL 2 GOAL:

To do at least 3-5 repetitions in a row before moving 1-5 steps closer to the trigger. A successful repetition is when your dog comfortably disengages with the trigger on his own.

As you move closer, keep playing LEVEL 2 if the trigger is not moving or changing in intensity. If the trigger is moving or changing in intensity, go back to LEVEL 1 at the new distance.