

**Back to Basics: Keeping Guidework Basics Fresh and Fun**

Last month we shared ideas to enrich the time spent at home with your guide, keeping boredom at bay while building on good behavior and nurturing your bond. As we continue sheltering at home through the month of April and into spring weather, we’re moving things out of the house for our second installment: advice for keeping your dog’s guidework responses crisp and enthusiasm high. Practicing the basics and creating opportunities for reinforcement will help you both return to a normal routine when the time comes, hitting the road without missing a beat.\*\*\*

***\*\*\*As always, the most important consideration is your health and safety, and that of your loved ones. Please be sure to follow social distancing guidelines for your area while attempting to apply any of these suggestions. If that’s not possible, continue to work with your dog only on the activities you can practice******while at home.***

#1 – Take advantage of any safe opportunity to practice guidework basics!

Dogs have excellent memories and will remember the usual path as soon as you’re back to your normal routine. For now, try to find opportunities for your dog to hear and respond to guidework commands, because they’re also great at generalizing and – because of their training and experience – know to apply those responses to any environment. As they hear commands and look for hazards and target points, move around obstacles, etc., their habits and skills are being maintained.

* Patterning counts! Worried about orientation or otherwise unsure of working your dog on a different route? Using your cane while heeling your dog is a great way for your guide to stay engaged and focused on guidework basics while following you through the steps and receiving rewards at key points. Human guide is another great option for this technique, if you’ve been isolating at home with someone who’d like to help. Have your dog in harness while patterning, and use regular guidework commands, but do not pick up the handle. Your dog will get exercise as well as the mental stimulation of a guidework route.
* Location can vary or stay the same. Perhaps you’re able to access another neighborhood or part of the city for some practice while things are quiet during this period of social distancing. Or maybe there are places around your house for neighborhood exploration. Indoor work can be useful, such as if you have to make a Costco run. Even if you only have access to the same half mile loop around the neighborhood day after day, there are ways to make it more interesting…read on!
* We all need goals…you’ve probably heard us mention the importance of destinations and a sense of purpose to guidework routes. This is the time to be creative! Since access to most stores is not currently an option, come up with new ideas for target points - a bench, mailbox, light pole, bus stop, or maybe just an area where you can rest and play with a toy for a few minutes. With the right kind of reinforcement, you can convince your dog that pretty much any random landmark is super important to you. Which brings us to the next point….
* Make it fun and rewarding! Don’t forget to reinforce appropriate responses to commands with kibble or higher value treats, sincere praise, a favorite tug toy, and/or lovin’ ‘em up when you get to a target point.
  + A clicker is always a great tool to keep things interesting and increase enthusiasm – even prior to a route. Reviewing the clicker lectures will be a great way to revisit this technique if you’re out of practice:

<https://www.guidedogs.com/explore-resources/alumni-resources/class-lecture-materials2/clicker-part1-lecture>

<https://www.guidedogs.com/explore-resources/alumni-resources/class-lecture-materials2/clicker-part2-lecture>.

* + You can even stop and do some fun obedience exercises on the route, with or without clicker, to reinforce good behavior and add variety. Your dog will love it and the positive reinforcement will nurture enthusiasm and eagerness for guidework and for pleasing you.
  + Remember how much food you were using in class? And when you first got home? This has probably diminished, but now is a great time for a high frequency of food reward. When you start getting out and about again, bring extra food for more motivation.
  + It’s also helpful to keep in mind that whatever you’re doing at home to reward good behaviors and set clear expectations for your guide, will carry over into guidework behavior. Being proactive with good house behavior is an excellent way to keep your dog well behaved in all areas! One example would be a knock at the door – if you have someone sheltering in place with you, you can enlist their help for this activity - and your dog is calm. You can reward with a “good dog!” and food reinforcement. You may find you now have more time to work on certain behaviors such as recall work in the house and yard, barking at the door or out the window, or excited greeting behavior. You might also work on keeping the dog out of the kitchen where the food is prepared, dropping food and working on any scavenging behaviors. These are just a few examples.
  + For deeper insight into what motivates your guide dog, review Michelle Pouliot’s lecture on the topic by following this link:

<https://www.guidedogs.com/explore-resources/alumni-resources/class-lecture-materials2/why-does-your-guide-dog-work-lecture>.

* Practice clear and consistent communication. Squirrels can be hard to resist when they’re playing near the sidewalk on a sunny day! Being proactive in managing unwanted behaviors when they occur is key to a well-balanced partnership. Reviewing the class lectures, “Communicating with your Guide Dog” and “Managing your Guide Dog” will provide a great refresher! Here are links to both:
  + <https://www.guidedogs.com/explore-resources/alumni-resources/class-lecture-materials2/communicating-with-your-guide-dog-lecture>
  + <https://www.guidedogs.com/explore-resources/alumni-resources/class-lecture-materials2/managing-your-guide-dog>
* And if you’re not having fun with the process on a given day, wait until tomorrow! We all know that these wonderful partners have an uncanny sense for how we’re feeling and these are tough times. So if you’re down or frustrated, it’s always ok to take a minute to relax, breathe, love up your dog, and try again in a minute or an hour or a day later.

#2 Dogs thrive on routine!

Maintaining the same daily habits will help to prepare your dog for the return to a previous routine, while also providing a sense of stability. For example: your 9-5 office job includes a morning and afternoon commute route, and a lunchtime outing; during office hours your dog lies on a bed next to or under your desk. Simulating this schedule might mean getting out for a route at the usual times. If your dog normally wears a harness for a few hours during the workday, while in meetings and such, maybe try doing the same in your home office during video conferencing. Whatever your normal routine, find ways to create a new one that mimics it.

#3 Keep calm and carry on.

Most importantly, try not to worry. Guide dogs can take time off without any of their work regressing. Your dog will remember the old routes, even if you’ve only done them a few times. In fact, if there were some challenges that you were addressing, you may find the time off was helpful and that a particular difficulty has been resolved once you’re back to the old routine. Also helpful to know is that dogs trained using clicker and food reward/positive methods remember their training very well.  Although you may only be able to get out on short, quiet routes, the positive training on those routes will keep your dog motivated and guidework proficient.

Finally, remember that we’re here to provide telephonic support for you all through this unprecedented time. When we return to normal operations, Field Service Managers will be prioritizing travel by individual necessity while also visiting applicants and assisting with other GDB functions as needed. We are so grateful for your understanding and support, and hope that these suggestions for maintaining basics will enable a seamless transition back to guidework as usual when the time comes!