

# How to Keep Your Dog Calm When the Doorbell Rings

By [Nan Arthur](#) on 05/01/2007  
Filed in - [Teach](#) - [Skills for Every Day](#)

## Does this ring a bell?

*The crowd gathers outside and is tense with anticipation as it makes its way to the paddock (your front porch).*

*The field is lined up.*

*Ding dong...*

*"And, they're off."*

*"Out of the gate is Fido, pacing ahead of Suburban Woman."*

*"From the back, it's Fifi, a long shot, but picking up the pace."*

*"Rounding the turn, it's Fido, with Suburban Woman picking up momentum, and Fifi a length behind."*

*"Down to the wire, it's Fido, but Suburban Woman is closing in!"*

*"It's Fido crossing the threshold, and the crowd goes wild..."*

*... and so does Suburban Woman who is trying to get Fido and Fifi to stop celebrating on her guests.*

Are you Suburban Woman, loving but exasperated owner of Fido and Fifi? Does your home seem like the 5<sup>th</sup> at Santa Anita every time the doorbell rings? Wouldn't it be wonderful if your dog actually moved away from the door when the doorbell rang rather than crowd you for a position to greet, or "eat," the people on the other side? Wouldn't you love to have a dog that sits, lies down, or even runs to another room when the doorbell rings—instead of all the embarrassing things your dog currently does?

Rather than wishing and hoping your dog will just stop going crazy, or trying to wrestle your dog away from the door every time you have a visitor, place your bet on a sure thing by training your dog for this situation. With some effort and a commitment to practicing with your dog, completing this doorbell game will make you feel like you have just won the Daily Double.



## The Doorbell Game: Getting started

Before you begin, decide where you would like your dog to go or what you would like your dog to do when the doorbell rings. If your dog has a history of jumping and behaving like a circus act gone mad at the sound of the doorbell, your goal might be to send him to another room, to a crate, or outside for simplicity or safety reasons. If your dog just barks, or pushes you out of the way to greet your guests, you might be able to train a "sit" or "down" after the doorbell rings. Your final decision should be one based on safety and realistic expectations. It wouldn't be reasonable to ask a dog that escapes, or has a history of nipping or aggressing when people come in, to sit or lie down as "scary" strangers parade past, but that would be a wonderful goal for a dog that is overly friendly.

Training should always be done in a quiet environment. Make sure you have at least 10-15 minutes of uninterrupted time whenever you practice so that your dog has a chance to really absorb the information. Take your time, practice a few times each day, and remember that it could take several days or even a week or two before you obtain the desired results.

You will need a **clicker**-savvy and hungry dog, several levels of food rewards (from average to high-value treats), a treat pouch so your treats are readily available, and your clicker. Eventually you will need someone to be your "guest" and to help you ring the doorbell, but not until you have the foundation behaviors in place.

When you reach for the doorknob, it often triggers an already excited dog. His anticipation is high; someone is visiting or, potentially, intruding. You must first train your dog to calm down. Your dog's composed **behavior** will allow you to walk to the door unencumbered and inform your guests that you will be with them in a moment. Then you can direct your dog what to do before you actually open the door.

The preliminary step in training this diversion exercise is to teach your dog to move away from the entry so that you have some room to get to the door without him crowding or pushing.

Keep in mind that during the early stages of this training your dog doesn't have to do anything except move away from the door. Don't ask for a "sit" or other trained behavior just yet; you can add those later if that is the goal.

### **With some effort and a commitment to practicing with your dog, completing this doorbell game will make you feel like you have just won the Daily Double.**

Invite your dog to come with you to the closed front door. Hold a number of treats in the same hand as your clicker (you want the other hand to be free) and take a deep breath. Reach out with your empty hand and touch the doorknob, turning so that you can observe your dog. Watch your dog carefully, as you will be looking for subtle movements during these early stages. At this point in the training, you won't open the door, but just touch or hold the doorknob.

Your dog is free to move around, but what you are looking for is any movement away from the door. Click and treat when your dog moves or backs away from the door even the tiniest bit. Click and treat several times while the dog is in that position, reaching out to feed him so he doesn't have to come close to you or the door in order to get his treat.

Repeat the exercise 8-10 times, walking to the door from different areas in your home (as if someone had just rung the doorbell) and reward your dog for any movement away. Be sure to tell your dog, "All done," or another release **cue**, after each successful movement away from the door.

Continue to practice holding the doorknob and then clicking and treating for movement away from the door. If you see that your dog has figured out that the click occurs when he scoots or moves away, you are ready to train the next step.

But, if your dog continues to move forward toward the door when you reach for the doorknob, practice this foundation for a few more rounds, or even days, depending on your dog's **reinforcement** history of rushing the door. Take your time teaching the foundation of this exercise, as mastering this stage will help your dog stay focused when you do add the doorbell.

### **The foundation**

*Problem solver: When he sees you touch the doorknob, your dog may be super excited if he thinks someone is at the door or he is going for a walk. If your dog pushes toward the door or jumps on you, gently step between him and the door, using your body to impede his movement. Step forward into his space, if necessary, to urge him to slide off of you. Take a deep breath to help him (and you) relax. Do not make eye contact or talk, as this often gets dogs more excited. Calmly, walk a few steps from the door to show that you are not opening the door. Dropping a few treats on the floor for your dog to find as he tries to figure out why you are not leaving will help your dog calm down faster. Eating helps to calm the adrenaline, which, in turn, helps your dog "think" again. Just be sure to drop the treats slightly away from the door in order to show him that good things happen away from the door.*

### **Adding the cue and movement away from the door**

To teach your dog what to do after the doorbell rings, practice this next stage in several different steps. What you are teaching is that when you approach the door after the bell rings, a verbal cue will direct your dog to do something else—go to another room, go outside, or "sit" / "down" at a pre-determined station.

The goal of the foundation stage was to teach your dog some composure, as well as how to give you some space at the door. Once you have achieved that element, you can start to add the verbal cue, which tells your dog there is something you want him to do when the doorbell rings. However, you are still not ringing the bell just yet.

If you use a verbal cue such as "just a minute," you can both inform your guests that you will be right with them, taking the pressure off you to hurry and answer the door, and use the phrase as a direction cue to your dog to move away from the door and toward the area where you want him to go.

### **Plant the seed that the best rewards come after movement from the door.**

Use the average-value treats as you begin to add movement away from the door, clicking and treating for the initial movement. Switch to the high-value rewards once you get your dog to the area where he will be confined, or where you want him to be stationed in a "sit" or "down." Plant the seed that the best rewards come after movement from the door.

Once you have walked to the door, touched the doorknob, and announced the "just a minute" cue, turn and move away from the door, encouraging your dog to move with you. Say something like "good boy" or "let's go" as you pat your leg or gently clap your hands. The goal is to get 4-5 steps away from the door and then click and treat several times where you stop, using the best treats. Where you stop could be the final destination for dogs that will be stationed in a "sit" or "down" or an intermediate stop for those dogs that will need to be confined.

### **Confining your dog**

For dogs that need to be confined, practice getting farther and farther away from the door as you progress until you reach the area where you will confine him.

When you are ready to practice confining your dog, keep in mind that you may need to go all the way into the area with him the first few times so that he doesn't think you are "tricking" him into getting locked outside or in another room. This is where the high-value treats will come in.

Go all the way into the confinement area or all the way outside with your dog (another reason you need to tell your guests, "just a minute!"), and then have a click-and-treat party with the high-value rewards! Add lots of praise and fun talk. You really want your dog to think this is the most wonderful game in the world so that when you do add the doorbell, it is no big deal and your dog will start to head toward the confinement area. You can also do a food confetti party, by tossing lots of food around as you leave. Much later, when all training has been completed, you can offer a stuffed Kong, or a wonderful chew treat for your dog to work on as you leave him in the confinement area. If you are working with more than one dog, only do this if you know that the dogs won't fight over these treats.

### **Using a "sit" / "down" station**

If you are going to work on a "sit" or "down," your dog should already be fluent in that behavior. You should have a mat or rug several steps away from the door so that your dog can be sent to that area. The mat acts as a visual cue for your dog and makes it much easier for him to find his spot each time. It also prevents your dog from sliding around if the area has a slippery surface.

Direct your dog to the mat or rug after the "just a minute" cue and ask for the "sit" or "down." Begin to back away slowly so that you can observe your dog as you move toward the door to open it. The goal is to be able to return to the door as your dog remains on the mat.

Increase the distance between you and your dog in small steps, taking one step away and then coming right back to click and treat him. Next, try two steps, quickly moving back again to click and treat. Continue to add more steps until your dog can remain at the station and you can get all the way to the door.

As you work on increasing the distance, take breaks and then resume your training by going to the door from different areas in the house. Continue at this level until you can get all the way back to the door with your dog in place.

## Opening the door

Once your dog can wait at the station, you can try opening the door as your dog remains in position. The first sequences should look like this:

1. Come from different areas in the house
2. Announce the "just a minute" cue
3. Direct your dog to the station
4. Walk to the door and jiggle the doorknob

Did your dog remain in place? If he did, walk all the way back to your dog to click and reward, and then repeat several times before adding the next step: opening the door.

When you are ready to open the door, open it just a little, close it, and then go back to your dog to click and reward. Continue until you can open the door completely with your dog remaining in place.

Once you are able to open the door entirely, have a helper assist you by waiting outside the door as you open it. Have him or her walk in as you go back to your dog to click and reward.

**Keep in mind that you will need a very high-value reward and multiple clicks and treats for dogs that find the arrival of guests highly rewarding. In other words, be better than the environment with your rewards!**

When you try this "for real," ask your guests to come in on their own in the early stages of training so that everyone doesn't get congested in the entryway, making it more difficult for your dog to maintain his "sit" or "down." Keep in mind that you will need a very high-value reward and multiple clicks and treats for dogs that find the arrival of guests highly rewarding. In other words, be better than the environment with your rewards!

If your dog gets up at any point, your helper should stop and back up (going all the way back to the door, or even outside, and closing the door, if necessary). Gently block your dog with your body and direct him back to the station until you can convince him that the way he gets to visit is to continue to sit or lie down.

Practice these components many times throughout the day, until you can see your dog moving away from the door when you say, "just a minute" and until you are successful directing your dog back to his station. As this is a difficult command to train and learn, you may want to suspend any other training while you work on this command.

*Problem solver: If your dog gets up at any point after you have stationed him in a "sit" or "down," it is important that you do not click and treat just yet. You don't want your dog to learn that he can get up, follow you, or greet people on his own, and still get a reward. Instead, after you have him back in place, smile and use your voice and praise to encourage him to stay put until you have made it all the way back to the location where you or your helper was when he got up. Once you get that far, walk back to your dog, and then click and treat several times. The dog will begin to learn that you want him to remain there and, for doing so, you will come back and reward him. If your dog keeps getting up, release your dog and train again after he has had a break. When you come back to training, make it easier by only taking a step or two in the early stages, or just have your helper stand quietly inside the threshold of the door if that is where your dog has difficulty. You can use a leash or tether to prevent your dog from moving too far away from the station until he better understands that the "sit" / "down" is the answer.*

## Adding the doorbell

Before you move on to this phase, your dog should be able to demonstrate success with the foundation steps described above. When you say the "just a minute" cue, he should move away from the door and go all the way with you to his confinement area or his station. All you will need to do now is pair the verbal cue with the doorbell.

Your helper, stationed outside, will be the doorbell ringer. You can use cell phones, a walkie-talkie, or a baby monitor to communicate to your helper when to ring the bell again, as you will not be opening the door in the early stages of this doorbell training. After your helper rings the doorbell, walk up to the front door, touch the doorknob (your dog should now be staying back or moving away), and then say, "just a minute."

*Problem solver: If after the doorbell rings and you move to the door to touch the doorknob, your dog doesn't stay back or move away, drop your **criteria**. Go back to work on touching the doorknob after the bell rings and work on this stage until you have your dog moving back again. This backward slide sometimes happens with dogs that have a strong reinforcement history of rushing the door. No big deal—just show your dog that it's the same game he learned earlier, but this time the doorbell rings first. Again, be sure your dog is fluent in the foundation steps before opening the door.*

As soon as the bell rings, say the "just a minute" cue and move to the confinement area or the "sit" / "down" station. Click and treat when your dog completes the behavior. Don't worry if your dog barks during this phase if he normally barks when the doorbell rings. You may always have a little barking associated with doorbell ringing before your dog moves to the confinement area or his station, but the barking often decreases as your dog learns what to do. Your dog may also run back to the door as you move away, but hold your ground and wait until he comes back to the area where you stopped before clicking and treating. Be sure to do a number of reinforcements when he does come back.

Practice ringing the doorbell and not opening the door. Keep repeating these same steps until you can see that the "just a minute" cue after the bell rings has your dog turning and moving toward his destination. If your goal is to confine your dog, be sure to do so.

Go back and invite your helper in after you have your dog in place in order to simulate someone actually coming in the house. To generalize this to different people, enlist several helpers to assist you with this final stage, but be sure to explain that they may have to wait outside a few minutes as you work through the completion of this training.

When your dog is training to a station and is consistently moving there with ease after the bell rings, go back to the steps of just turning the doorknob, and then opening the door a little, and so on, just as you did before the doorbell was added. The only difference here is that the doorbell now comes before all the other pieces. Continue until you can open the door and your guest is able to walk past you and your dog.

**The various stages may take time for you and your dog to master; don't be afraid of backing up and starting a stage again.**

## Conclusion

As you move from touching the doorknob to opening the door to ringing the doorbell and admitting guests, each stage of this training game builds on the previous learning. The various stages may take time for you and your dog to master; don't be afraid of backing up and starting a stage again. Enjoy the time with your dog—and the pleasure and treat parties along the way!

With continued practice, the constant race to the front door will be eliminated and the doorbell will no longer be like the starting bell of the Kentucky Derby. Your guests will wager that visiting you results in a big payoff, as each time they enter your home they are greeted by a

responsive and respectful dog. You, your dog, and your guests all will have won the doorbell game!

**About the author** Nan Arthur, CDDBC, CPDT, has been involved in the behavior and training of dogs and cats for more than 18 years and is a longtime member of APDT. She owns [Nan Arthur's Whole Dog Training](#), providing private training and group classes throughout San Diego County.