



# Guide Dogs for the Blind

## Working With Guide Dog Puppies Around Distractions

**Videos:** [Working With Guide Dog Puppies Around Distractions Part 1](#)  
[Working With Guide Dog Puppies Around Distractions Part 2](#)

Guide dog puppies must learn to maintain impulse control and respond to cues from their handler in the presence of distractions. We don't expect, or want, the puppy to be unaware of its environment; a guide dog must be conscious of the world around it to effectively do its job. Puppies socialized and trained in many different situations, with graduated exposure to distractions, will be best prepared to enter formal guide training.

Puppies vary in their energy level and temperaments; as they transition through phases in their development, some puppies may be more challenged by some types of distraction than other puppies of the same age. Please consult with your leader and PFM if the puppy you are raising is not making progress as expected.

### The “Three D’s” of Dog Training

In the puppy raising manual we often refer to the ‘three D’s’ of distraction, distance and duration. As with training other behaviors, all elements of the three D’s need to be considered when introducing distractions. When one element of the three is increased in difficulty the other elements should be made easier.

- **Distraction** – the stimulus that attracts the puppy’s attention. Examples include people, other dogs, objects on the ground. The intensity of the distraction may vary; solicitous people are more distracting than stationary, non-verbal people; active dogs are more distracting than dogs lying down; moving, or food-like, objects are more distracting than less appealing objects etc.
- **Distance** – how far away the distraction is from the puppy must be considered. Increasing distance from the distraction makes it easier for the puppy to maintain impulse control and focus on the handler.
- **Duration** - how long the puppy is exposed to the object or situation. Brief, successful encounters are a good way to start. Exposures should end on a positive note. A frequent mistake by inexperienced handlers is asking for a bit more when a puppy is mentally tired and needs a break.

### Managing the Inexperienced Puppy Around Distractions in Real Life

There will be times when the puppy is in public or at school/work with the raiser when distractions are too close or too much for the puppy. This is especially the case when the puppy is young. The raiser should try to minimize exposure to such situations, but sometimes distractions happen unexpectedly, or are impossible to avoid. This is where the [Emergency Lure Technique](#) is useful. With a naïve puppy attending school or work, the Emergency Lure may have to be utilized multiple times per day. No harm will be done to the puppy’s development with multiple uses of the Emergency Lure. It is better to help the puppy through the situation in a positive manner, than allow it to practice negative behaviors such as keying on a distraction and/or pulling and lunging toward a distraction. With purposefully set up distractions while training and at meetings, and graded counterconditioning in more conducive public settings, the puppy will gradually learn to keep its focus around distractions of any type.

### Early Games and Impulse Control Around Distractions

As soon as the puppy knows how to accept food rewards, distraction work can begin. In these early games, the puppy may be looking at the distraction while keeping a loose leash or staying on the Paw Pad. We are rewarding impulse control, along with teaching for example, leash manners.

[Ground Tether Game #1](#)  
[Ground Tether Game #2](#)

## [Hand Tether Game](#)

Early paw pad games can be a fun introduction to distraction work. Once the puppy is familiar with the Paw Pad, and has some duration, an assistant can add some minor distractions at a reasonable distance, while the handler stays close to the pad and provides a high rate of reinforcement. Dropped food games are a great introduction to a very common distraction!

### [Paw Pad Game #2](#)

### [Dropped Food Games](#)

## **Distraction Game Set Ups**

*The three D's should be kept in mind as the puppy is worked through each type of distraction!*

### Stationary

- With the puppy sitting or standing at “heel” position a distraction (another dog/toy/person whatever the puppy finds distracting) is presented at such a distance that the puppy hardly notices it. The moment the puppy looks away from the distraction, or otherwise shows disinterest, it should be marked and rewarded. Looking anywhere but at the distraction, relaxed ears and muscles, checking in with the handler, are all opportunities to reward
- The handler may give a prompt by saying the puppy’s name. The second the puppy glances up at the handler’s face it should be marked and rewarded. The ultimate goal is for the pup to redirect itself without the use of a verbal prompt. It is not necessary, nor desirable, for the puppy to stare continuously at the handler’s face. However, looking at the handler is preferable to staring at the distraction
- If the puppy is too distracted (e.g., staring at the distraction) the distance should be increased
- A high rate of reinforcement should be used at first to keep the puppy engaged. This may mean the handler has to pre-load the hand and do “rapid fire” delivery then return to a more normal rate of food delivery as the puppy is worked through the distraction. (See this part of [Food Reward Basics Part 2](#))
- Giving the puppy lots of breaks to enjoy interacting with the handler with secondary reinforcement (praise and petting) will help keep the game fun and gives the puppy another reason to focus on the handler rather than the distraction

### Moving

*Note: Puppies may actually be easier to keep focused on the handler if they are moving (Loose Leash Walking) rather than stationary*

- The puppy is walked parallel to the distraction with the puppy on the outside (with the handler in between it and the distraction) at first
- Meandering and doing some turns will help keep the pup’s attention
- Sufficient distance is kept from the distraction to make it easy for the puppy to ignore the distraction
- The puppy should be engaged with verbal praise and given the opportunity to be marked and rewarded *before* passing the distraction to increase engagement with the handler
- A high rate of reinforcement should be used at first to keep the puppy engaged. This may mean the handler has to pre-load the hand and do “rapid fire” delivery then return to a more normal rate of food delivery as the puppy is worked through the distraction
- Checking in with the handler and looking anywhere but at the distraction are opportunities to mark and reward.

## **Progressing to ‘Real World’ Distractions**

Part of successfully socializing a guide dog puppy is recognizing when the puppy is ready to be worked through a distraction versus using the Emergency Lure or removing the puppy from a situation altogether. As the puppy matures and learns to focus on its handler, it may be exposed to more challenging everyday situations. The handler should be aware of the environment and ready to engage with the puppy before approaching a distraction. Letting the pup know that the game is on, and rewards are available, will prime the puppy before it has a chance to become engaged in the distraction.

Puppies that are difficult to keep focused, or develop a strong interest in certain distractions, may need additional protocols. Raisers should consult with the leader or PFM if they notice the puppy is becoming more aware of distractions. Early intervention is key to keeping puppies on task and to prepare them for their future role of guiding in a world full of potential distractions!