

# Training the Handler Defense Exercise

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*The following is an approximate description of the process we're currently using in our club to teach the Handler Defense exercise. For those of you who are experienced trainers, this article may not have much to offer, but for novice trainers, especially those who do not have the benefit of working with an experienced trainer, it is my hope that this article will give you a better understanding of the exercise and its components so that you can develop a process that works for you and your dogs.*

The Handler Defense exercise can be taught to a dog using a decoy carrying a tug or bite pillow, or with a decoy wearing a bite suit, provided the dog already has a solid bitework foundation. Even with a complete bitework foundation, I've found that a decoy carrying a tug is considerably less exciting to the dog than a decoy wearing a bitesuit, which tends to make it easier for the dog to control himself and think clearly, which can make it easier for the dog learn the mechanics of the exercise. Another advantage to using a decoy with a tug versus a bitesuit is that the tug can be given to the dog which eliminates the need for an "out" while you teach the exercise. In my experience, if a dog can heel with his handler toward an approaching "stranger", sit calmly while they shake hands and converse briefly, and then heel away with his handler – basically a dry run of the exercise without a decoy – then he's ready to learn this exercise. Granted, it can be taught to a dog who can't do the dry run, but it does create additional variables and obstacles that will need to be worked through.

The method described in this article uses the bite on the tug or decoy as the dog's reward, so it requires that the dog actually view the tug or decoy in that light. This method is not likely to be effective for dogs who are defensive, fearful or do not have sufficient or proper drive for the tug or decoy.

If, at any point during this process, your dog doesn't seem to be "getting it", you might need to take a step backward to start showing him again how to have success, and you might need to further break down the step with which he's struggling – this is not a failure; it is simply part of the process of training. Typically, if my dog is struggling with something, it's because I'm not showing him what he needs to see; sometimes I have to ease up the criteria a bit in order for him to have success so that he can understand what he needs to do. This is where it's handy to have your club members share what they're seeing – generally when I can't figure out what's causing the problem, one of the people watching has an idea.

Basic concepts we need to teach to the dog: A. You may not bite until the decoy aggresses. B. Until the aggression, you must always maintain physical contact with your handler while remaining constantly vigilant of the decoy.

The following steps describe a progression that will teach the dog those two key concepts and should convince him that *his* actions can control the exercise. All references to the "decoy" can be an actual decoy in a bitesuit, or just some person carrying a tug or bite pillow to reward the dog.

**1. Stationary dog and handler with decoy approaching for conversation.** Show the dog that controlling himself by remaining in a sit next to his handler will cause the decoy to come closer, but breaking the sit and/or leaving the handler causes the decoy stop advancing, or even retreat.

We begin with the dog and handler at the line of departure and the decoy standing still about 10 meters away. The handler commands the dog to sit, and once the dog takes the position, the decoy walks toward the dog and handler. Typically, the dog will get excited, and try to advance toward the decoy. As soon as the dog breaks the sit, the decoy stops walking or retreats and the handler gets the dog back to the line of departure and again commands the sit. The decoy advances again once the dog is sitting. Sometimes this process can take a few minutes – be patient. If the dog cannot complete this step so that the decoy can reward him with a bite, then he probably needs some help. He might need some more work on handling the stranger-approaching scenario with someone who's not a decoy, and/or he might find it easier to control himself if the person approaching is simply carrying a tug or wearing a leg sleeve, as opposed to the full bitesuit. If you can set up the dog for success by making his introduction to this game a little easier (by making the approaching stranger a bit less exciting), he should progress quite quickly.

**2. Attack without command.** Show the dog that the decoy's aggression (hitting the handler), not the decoy's proximity, is his cue to bite.

When the dog manages to remain in a sit next to his handler long enough for the stranger to approach calmly and pause for a very brief moment, the stranger quickly hits the handler, and

the handler tells the dog to attack. The quick motion will likely trigger the dog to bite, but the attack command, and perhaps some encouragement, will ensure that it happens. Give the dog a nice fight to reward him for doing the right thing.

We repeat the first two steps as many times as necessary until the dog can perform this behavior reliably, and shows that he understands that he must control himself by remaining in heel position and that he's waiting for the attack from the decoy as his cue to bite. During these repetitions, we gradually increase the duration of the conversation prior to the aggression from the stranger, add in the handshake, and possibly require the dog to be silent (rather than barking his head off). The dog should be very attentively watching the decoy, and awaiting his opportunity to bite.

**3. Dog heeling with handler with decoy approaching for conversation.** Show the dog that the approaching decoy scenario he now understands (and likely enjoys) is preceded by heeling toward the decoy.

Once the dog understands well the behavior required of him in the first two steps, as well as the reward he'll receive for offering it, you can add in the fact that he must now heel toward the approaching stranger for a few steps. Even though the dog should already have become accustomed to waiting for a short handshake and conversation to end, we go back to a very short (1 or 2 second) conversation before the aggression since we

are now adding in an additional requirement for him to earn his bite. After a few repetitions, he should understand this new requirement, and you should be able to build back up to a full-length handshake and conversation in just a few more repetitions. Additionally, you can gradually increase the distance he must heel toward the stranger.

**4. Dog pivoting forward around stationary handler with departing decoy.** Teach the dog that, after the conversation, maintaining physical contact with handler, not escorting the decoy, earns the bite. The dog will pivot forward around the handler as the decoy departs away from the dog.

Now that the dog fully understands that controlling himself while heeling toward the approaching stranger and waiting patiently for the conversation to end will allow him to earn a bite, you can add the additional criteria that he must now maintain his vigilance of the decoy but stay with his handler as the decoy departs. As with the last step, since we're adding an additional requirement for him to earn the bite, we will ease up on the other components at the beginning to help him to succeed so that he can understand what we want.

We begin as we did in the first step, by requiring the dog to remain in a sit next to the handler while the decoy makes a short approach followed by a short conversation. By now, your dog should be able to do this easily, and he should be eagerly anticipating his reward bite. At the end of the short conversation, the decoy takes a step backward, away from the dog and handler (but still close enough for the aggression) and then departs away from the dog (to the decoy's left) for a few steps. The handler says "goodbye" or "au revoir" and will likely need to encourage the dog to leave heel position to take a step toward the decoy. Once the



**Dog "heeling" backward next to handler as decoy approaches for the aggression. Photo by Shelley Nelson**

dog takes that first step, the decoy attacks immediately to reward the behavior. At this point, it's normal for the dog to be uncertain whether it's maintaining his proximity to the decoy or his proximity to the handler that's earning the bite for him, especially if the dog already knows how to escort, as he's likely to give that behavior a try. Once the dog understands he can leave heel position to "follow" the decoy, he needs to be taught how to do so without leaving the handler.

We like to teach that actually touching or leaning on the handler during the pivot, rather than just proximity to the handler, is the behavior that earns the bite. This can make for some difficult walking once you and your dog are departing away from the decoy after the conversation, but it seems to be clearer to the dog than mere proximity, and it allows the dog to maintain a vigilant watch of the decoy while still being able to keep track of the handler. Thad Peterson coined the phrase "heeling by Braille" to describe this technique. We've found that the handler is in the best position to determine when the dog is actually touching (leaning on) the handler, so we require the handler to signal the

decoy to reward the dog by making the attack. The timing of this signal and the decoy's quick response are critical in order for the dog to understand clearly what he did that led to his reward – he could be touching the handler when the handler signals, but then not touching one second later when the decoy attacks. In order to accomplish our goal here, we have the handler hold a clicker in the air after she gives the "goodbye" cue to the dog and then click when the dog is offering the proper leaning behavior to signal the decoy to attack. It shouldn't take long for the dog to figure out the "click equals bite" concept, with the clicker making a very clear marker of the behavior that earned the reward bite, so he might not wait for the attack, but bite in response to the click. Once the leaning-on-the-handler behavior is established, we stop using the clicker so that the dog goes back to biting only when the decoy attacks, and simply require that the decoy *only* make the attack when the dog is touching the handler.

Some dogs grasp the concept of touching the handler quickly, but others seem to need the situation clarified a bit further. If the decoy does not take a large enough step back away from the dog and handler after the "goodbye", the dog will be able to be close to the handler and the decoy at the same time, which doesn't allow him to discern which person to stick with. Having

the decoy take a large step backward after the "goodbye", followed by departing to his left (away from the dog), the dog will have to choose to either escort the decoy and leave the handler, or stay with the handler while watching the decoy. If he makes the wrong choice, the decoy stops moving and the handler gets the dog back into position, and hopefully has an opportunity to signal for the reward if the dog touches the handler when he returns. From the dog's perspective, when he leaves the handler, the action stops, but if he stays with the handler and touches or leans, the action continues which will

lead to the bite. Be aware that the initial touching might not be as strong as you want the final behavior to be, but you can work up to that. At the beginning, it's important for the dog to have success, so staying with the handler with any touching for just one or two steps of the decoy is enough to earn the first couple reward bites.

As the dog's understanding of leaning on the handler develops, the decoy will no longer need to take a step back before departing, and can circle all the way around the handler, sometimes multiple times, in order for the dog to earn the bite. Spending a good deal of time on the concept of leaning while circling the handler will create a very strong behavior of staying with the handler until the decoy attacks, which is critical to the success of this exercise in a trial situation.

**5. Dog pivoting backward around stationary handler with departing decoy.** Teach the dog to maintain physical contact while pivoting backward around the stationary handler as the decoy departs toward the dog.

Once the dog understands the “goodbye” cue and circling and leaning on the handler when the decoy departs away from the dog, the dog can be shown that the same rules apply when the decoy departs toward the dog (to the decoy’s right). This is slightly more difficult for some dogs because it requires them to walk backward to circle their handler, but we utilize the same process, and the dog should learn quickly that the same rules apply to this scenario. Even though the dog can already fully circle the handler in the other direction, we try to ensure his success by simply asking for one step backward to earn his first reward, and then progress from there as he demonstrates that he understands what we’re asking of him.

When the dog’s pivoting around the handler behavior is really solid in both directions, we can move on to the backward “heeling”.

**6. Dog “heeling” backward with handler with decoy approaching for aggression.** Teach the dog to “heel” backward next to the handler in order to cause the decoy to aggress.

Now that the dog understands how to be vigilant of the decoy while staying in physical contact with his stationary handler, we increase the reward criteria once again by requiring him to maintain his vigilance while staying with his moving handler in order to earn the bite. As with all the previous steps, we will try to help the dog to succeed so that he can understand this new expectation by easing up on the steps he already knows.

Some trainers prefer to introduce the backing-up behavior in an obedience context, usually along a wall or fence line, prior to requesting the behavior from the dog within the context of the exercise. While I think there is no harm in doing this, I have not found it to be a necessary step since the properly motivated dog will realize in a couple of repetitions what behavior is resulting in the reward bite.

We begin with the dog in heel position sitting next to his handler and the decoy waiting about 10 meters away. The dog should have no trouble waiting calmly as the decoy approaches and has a brief conversation with the handler. At the end of the conversation, the handler gives the dog’s verbal “goodbye” cue, which should indicate to the dog that it’s time to move, and he may get up out his sit position. The dog should have no trouble pivoting around the handler as the decoy departs away from the dog in order to be vigilant of the decoy as he or she moves around behind the handler, but staying close enough to attack. The handler then takes a step forward and slightly away from the dog and encourages/helps the dog to step backward in order to regain physical contact with the handler. If the dog takes even a small step backward, even if he doesn’t regain physical contact with the handler, the decoy attacks immediately to reward the dog to make it clear that backing up was definitely the right thing to do. This process is repeated with the criteria for the reward slightly increased as the dog begins to understand what he must do – the dog must actually step back *and* make physical contact. Once the dog can do both of those things with the handler making one step, the criteria is increased to two steps, then three, etc.; with each step of the dog and handler, the decoy gives the dog an interim reinforcer for the correct behavior by stepping with the dog and handler and then attacking to reward the dog with a bite. Even though the handler will be encouraging the dog to back up into what is essentially a secondary “heel” position, for the sake of clarity for the dog, we do not use the

dog’s heel command; instead, we use the “goodbye” cue to let the dog know that, once again, physical contact will earn the reward bite.

**7. Dog heeling and pivoting around handler with decoy approaching for aggression** Dog moving forward or backward remains in physical contact with moving handler while “following” departing decoy.

Now that the dog knows all of the components of the exercise, he should be able to move on to completing a very basic version of the whole exercise, with the decoy departing so that he ends up behind the handler a step or two just outside attacking distance.

We begin again with the dog sitting in heel position and the decoy waiting about 10 meters away. Once again, the decoy approaches and has a brief conversation with the handler. At the end of the conversation, the handler gives the dog’s verbal “goodbye” cue, the decoy departs away from the dog, but doesn’t stay within attacking distance of the handler, he moves instead in a slightly larger arc so that he ends up a step or two away from the dog and handler once he’s in position behind the handler. The dog should be on the handler’s right, facing the decoy, and, provided the dog is stable in his position, the handler takes a step forward and slightly away from the dog (to the handler’s left) to break the physical contact. If the dog offers the correct behavior by backing up and moving into the handler to regain physical contact, we calmly praise him and the decoy takes a step forward to give the dog an interim reinforcer. The handler takes another step forward and away from the dog, and when the dog steps back into the correct position against the



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handler, the decoy attacks immediately. This process can be repeated requiring three, four, five, etc. steps, each time with the decoy moving a step closer to show the dog that he's getting closer to his reward. While we introduce this process of backing up and into the handler in very distinct steps, it's easy to transition from here into the handler walking continuously with the dog backing up with the handler in order to avoid breaking physical contact.

### **8. Complete Exercise / Proofing.**

Once the dog demonstrates he can reliably stay with his handler, the handler can add back in the full beginning of the exercise (heeling up to the approaching decoy). Additionally, the decoy can begin to show the dog all the scenarios he might encounter in a trial situation – the decoy might depart away from the dog or toward him, he might approach quickly or slowly, he might walk back and forth behind the handler as he approaches, etc.

If, during the decoy's approach behind the handler, the dog breaks physical contact, all the action stops immediately until he regains his proper position. Once he's back in contact with his handler and facing the decoy, the decoy moves forward again and the handler can start walking again so that the dog can earn his reward bite. It shouldn't take long for the dog to learn that leaving his handler means that the action stops, and he's not getting closer to his reward. Once the dog does this reliably, the handler should continue to take the occasional deliberate step to the left in order to require the dog to take deliberate steps into the handler, thereby emphasizing the need to maintain physical

contact and showing the dog what to do if he does lose track of his handler during the excitement of a trial.

Even though the dog now fully understands the exercise, we still occasionally surprise him with an attack during the conversation or during the decoy's departure to ensure that he continues to anticipate that his reward could happen at any time, which ensures his vigilance throughout the exercise.

*I realized while writing this article how, in my head, what seemed to be a relatively simple exercise to train is actually a rather involved process to describe. I've done my best to explain each step carefully while trying to avoid going into laborious detail (not sure if I've actually accomplished that). If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at [xago1112@hotmail.com](mailto:xago1112@hotmail.com).*

*As with any training article, please keep in mind that this is only one of an infinite number of methods, and that every dog is different. The success of new methods can largely depend on whether they make sense to your dog as a result of the training he's already experienced. Feel free to take what works for you, and ignore the rest. Good luck, and happy training!*

### **Know the rules... Defense of Handler**

4.10.3 The decoy shall approach the handler and initiate conversation with the handler once he or she is within 3 meters. The handler must immobilize at the start of the conversation with the decoy (tolerance of 1 step), but not before (penalty of 5 points from General Outlook).