

Rules of Engagement

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Don't we *all* want that dog that pushes us to work, and remains enthusiastic, spirited, focused, and engaged on the trial field even when classic rewards aren't present? There are [different types and levels of engagement](#), but that active, sustained engagement is what we eventually want. Taking the time to cultivate this active engagement is incredibly beneficial to both the relationship and the trial picture. But before we start training it, we need to know the rules!

Yes, good engagement has rules, and if you've trained for any length of time in IPO, you'll realize that sometimes it's hard to follow them, because we may have been doing - or been told to do - the exact opposite!

RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

- 1. Start with focus.** Never try to train an unfocused dog! Focus is a large part of Schutzhund, and is closely linked with engagement. Doing focus work and focus games help lay the foundation for the stages of engagement. In focus work, the dog learns that turning his attention to you is highly rewarding and enjoyable. Then, when it comes to engagement, we will be cultivating focused *movement* and not just stationary focus. It is important to use natural, voluntary focus and not commanded focus (i.e. "Look", or "Watch" cues).
- 2. Work engagement separately from anything else (at first).** If engagement is what you want to work on, then train it separately, and not during other work. That is, not yet! You will add work into engagement at the higher levels, and engagement exercises will eventually become part of your pre-trial warm up routine. But for now, work on it separately.
- 3. Be fully engaged with your dog.** Now is not the time to be distracted by club members asking you questions or wanting to talk with you while you train. We expect our dogs to be fully engaged, so we must do the same.

4. Choose the right training environment for your dog. Environment is the number one reason dogs fail to engage. There's no use in trying to work on engagement in the exciting club environment when your dog can't even do it at home! Select the least stimulating environment for *your* particular dog, and go from there. Later, you will add distractions and move to busier places, but do your best to set your dog up for success, rather than overwhelm him with distractions. Repeated failure usually indicates a problem with your environment selection. Remember that age can be a factor here, too, if you have a puppy or teenager!

5. Give your dog a chance to look around and acclimate. You won't get true engagement if your dog feels stressed, curious, or nervous about his environment, so give him a chance to look around. This may take a few minutes to even ten minutes or more, depending on the dog. You don't have to let him go see EVERYTHING in his environment, but let him sniff, look around, potty, and sniff some more.

This is huge for many young dogs, and for excitable or slightly edgy Schutzhund dogs. They need a chance to look around. We cannot just take them from crate to field and expect excellent work, especially if we are in a new location. The dogs that can do this are indeed rare, and are a product of genetics, maturity, experience, and overwhelming drive for toy or handler that overrides interest in the environment. This does not describe most dogs. So give your dog a chance to acclimate, then make a distinction between acclimation and training time, such as putting the dog in a down or a sit for a few moments. When the dog starts offering eye contact, then move into engagement. Eventually, this will become part of your warm-up for competition.

6. Match your dog's energy. If your dog's energy level is only so-so, and you start trying to pump him up by wildly whipping around the toy, running backwards, etc., you may overwhelm your dog and create a reactive form of engagement, or just toy-based "engagement" instead of handler-focused engagement. Instead, match his energy, and then as you progress through the engagement process, slowly increase your energy and enthusiasm to encourage the dog to increase his.

7. Don't correct for lack of engagement! You will experience failure, and this is NOT an opportunity to physically correct the dog to make him re-engage. During all engagement work, you do NOT correct the dog. We are teaching him to willingly, happily, and enthusiastically engage with us; corrections diminish this picture, and can create reactive or even forced engagement. Corrections may also force the dog to give a false picture of engagement to avoid the correction, even if they would rather leave if they could. Remember that engagement is about the dog *voluntarily* participating and forming meaningful connection with us, which means he has the option of saying "no". Corrections for engagement are the equivalent of saying "You WILL be with me, and you WILL like it, or else."

If your dog is on leash and you find yourself tempted to correct the dog for losing focus and disengaging, then either attach the leash around your waist to keep your hands free, or find a place where you can safely have your dog off-leash without fear of distractions. And if your dog is repeatedly failing to engage, then stop and evaluate your situation. Too distracting of an environment? Not enough acclimation time? Dog nervous or anxious or overstimulated? Attempting to go too far too fast? Back up and find the last place of success, then go from there.

8. When failure happens, don't prompt the dog to re-engage. This is THE HARDEST THING for handlers to do: let their dogs fail at engagement. This is especially true when we are out there on the field and our dog's attention wanders while other people watch. We are told to re-engage the dog, get his attention, or correct him. So we kiss at him, call his name, wave the toy or tug around and make him miss it a few times, or give a pop on the collar, and when he re-engages we try to work again...until he disengages again. Then the cycle repeats itself.

In the first stage or with very young dogs, handler encouragement may be fine for a little while. But then shift the responsibility to the dog. If he disengages, stand still and wait. If he reengages, continue moving and reward! If he disengages more than two or three times, end the training session and put him up. If he's not wanting to engage, then he doesn't get to work. Then evaluate what happened before you try again later. Did he not get enough time to acclimate? Was the

environment too distracting? Were you too overpowering? Were you asking for too much? Were club members attempting to be “helpful” by providing distraction for your dog, before he’s actually ready for it?

9. Move when the dog is engaged, stop when he is not. Movement is crucial to engagement. When the dog is engaged, you are constantly moving with the dog, such as drawing the dog toward you while you move backwards, walking together, etc. Standing still becomes a signal for the dog to start engagement, which will be beneficial in the trial setting since every obedience exercise starts with a stationary basic position!

10. Don’t always have the reinforcers visible. We must teach the dog that focus is rewarded even when we don’t have food or toys on us. How many of us have heard—or perhaps said ourselves—that the dog won’t focus on the field once they don’t see the ball? To prevent this, we start hiding reinforcers in that second level of engagement, where the dog begins to offer eye contact for engagement. Hide the toys and food on your body, so he’s not looking for them and then offering engagement only when he spots them. We want the dog to offer focus and engagement even if he can’t see or smell reinforcers on us! This one is tough, because one of our first impulses is to show toy or food to the dog to start the game! Again, shift the responsibility to the dog.

11. Keep sessions short! This should only be 60 seconds or less at first, especially if working with young dogs and puppies. Initially, it might only be five seconds long! You can do several different sessions over the course of the day, but keep them short and successful. Always stop before the dog loses interest and experiences failure. Remember that we have to work on the dog’s timetable, not ours.

12. Keep it personal. Engagement is all about relationship, connection, and interest in you! So develop that personal connection. Use your voice and facial expressions, tone and body language to communicate enthusiasm and enjoyment to your dog. It’s not just about the toy or food you have; it’s also about you and your interaction with each other. Have fun!

These 12 rules set the proper structure for creating active engagement. As handlers, we must set the dog up for success. We also must remain flexible, and work with what the dog gives us. The dog's attitude, demeanor, and engagement can vary from day to day, environment to environment. Sometimes this requires us to change our plan, even though we set aside time to train and have a game plan in our minds. Be persistent, be patient, be consistent. You'll get there!