



# CANINE PHYSICAL FOUNDATION SKILLS

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## Notes:

1. These exercises are designed for **healthy, sound dogs**. Please consult with your veterinarian before asking dogs who have an illness or injury or are not physically sound to perform these behaviors or you risk injuring them. It is your responsibility to be realistic and respectful of your dog's abilities.
2. The how-to-teach suggestions given here are *suggestions*. There are as many effective and respectful ways to train as there are dogs. The methods here may or may not be effective with your dog. Force, however, is never an effective learning method. Whatever method you choose, please use a method that is respectful of your dog's innate intelligence and boundless ability to learn.
3. These skills (and others) are a foundation for core strength, balance, proprioception (where the body is in space), flexibility, and enhancing your relationship with your dog. There are other exercises that can build on these skills and additional skills that are useful in practice.
4. It is a general rule to always warm up your dog physically before doing specific exercises and cool her down after exercising. We want your dog's muscles to be warm and her joints and tendons to be lubricated before asking her body to do work. After working, it is preferable for her body to return to a quiet state actively (through gentle movement) rather than passively (during rest).
5. Always be alert to possible pain or discomfort in your dog. If you suspect pain, stop! Don't keep going to see if it continues. Believe her the first time.

Name of Skill/Exercise	Description
<p><b>Nose Touch</b></p> <p>The nose touch is an effective and gentle way to position your dog.</p>	<p>The goal is for the dog to touch her nose to the tips of your fingers or the palm of your hand so that her head remains in a neutral position (not raised or lowered from her natural stance). The dog may make light or firm pressure on your fingers. You want the <i>dog</i> to touch you; you do not want to bring your hand to the dog.</p> <p>How-to-teach suggestion: To start, rub a bit of treat on the tips of the fingers of one hand to get the scent on your fingers. This will be the target area. Then place your fingers just an inch in front of your dog's nose and wait for her to stretch forward to sniff (touch her nose to) your hand. Mark ("bing!" or click) when she touches her nose to your hand and then feed her a tiny treat.</p> <p>Each time she touches her nose to your hand is one repetition. The number of repetitions (of all exercises) is individual, varying by dog and by the effort required to do the exercise. Beginners or elderly dogs might start with 3-5 repetitions and work up to 10 or more over the course of weeks or months.</p>

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<p><b>Tuck Sit</b></p> <p>The tuck sit works to strengthen the core muscles. Balance and proprioception are also part of this exercise.</p>	<p>The goal is for the dog’s front feet to remain stationary while the hind limbs flex, raise up, and tuck under the dog evenly with toes pointed forward (not out to the side). The dog’s hips will rotate toward the dog’s front (rather than rocking back). The dog’s head and shoulders are to be in a neutral position.</p> <p>Start by cuing a sit and watching how your dog moves. If your dog consistently sits by shifting her weight back and moving her front feet backward, you will need to rename the tuck sit behavior and teach it as if it is new. It <i>will</i> be new to her!</p> <p>How-to-teach suggestion: Hold a treat steady at your dog’s nose (head and neck neutral) and ask for a sit. Do not raise the treat over her head, but instead hold it steady. Having a treat at her nose encourages her to bring her hind feet forward rather than moving her front feet back into the sit. You may need to gently hold her collar as additional encouragement to move differently. <i>Be careful not to pull her forward</i>, but instead provide <i>gentle</i> pressure.</p> <p>Working on a raised platform may also help her keep her body within the area, which can help her tuck into a sit rather than rock back into a sit. It may also be helpful to stand at her side rather than at her front so that you don’t inadvertently encourage her to move back through your body position. Going from a stand to a sit is one repetition.</p> <p>Here is a video example: <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1S0R0R8KZJE">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1S0R0R8KZJE</a></p>
<p><b>Kick-Back Stand</b></p> <p>The kick-back stand works to strengthen the core muscles. Balance and proprioception are also part of this exercise.</p>	<p>The goal is for the dog’s front feet to remain stationary (or move as little as possible), and her hind feet to step or hop back (“kick” back) to move into a standing position from a sit. The spine should be straight (not curved to one side or the other) and the dog’s topline should remain neutral (not hunched unless that is the natural stance for the breed). The dog’s feet should be evenly placed under his shoulders and hips (neither too close together or spread too far out).</p> <p>Start with your dog in a sit on a flat, stable surface. If you have a cue for “stand,” use it to see how your dog moves into a stand. If your dog stands by walking forward, you will need to rename this behavior and teach it as if it is new. It <i>will</i> be new to her!</p> <p>Here are some tips for helping your dog pay attention to her rear feet and kick back into a stand instead of moving forward. After saying the new cue, try one of these:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gently touch your dog in front of the knee or hind toes.</li> <li>• Touch your dog gently on her side near her belly.</li> <li>• Use the nose touch behavior by placing your hand target <i>slightly</i> in front of your dog’s nose.</li> <li>• Work on a raised platform to help her keep her body within the small tabletop.</li> </ul> <p>If your dog moves so that her spine is no longer straight or her rear feet are wide, reposition her before continuing. Going from a sit to a stand is one repetition. After your dog has mastered both the tuck sit and</p>

the kick-back stand, you can combine the tuck sit and the kick-back stand into one exercise through repetition. Here is a video example: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3alot8N5KFY>

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<p><b>Fold Down</b></p> <p>The fold down works the fore- and hind limbs as well as the core muscles.</p>	<p>The goal is to have your dog “fold” down smoothly into a sphinx position without moving either front or hind feet, rather than sitting first and then lying down. Both hind limbs and forelimbs are flexed with chest touching the ground. The dog’s spine is straight and her head is in a neutral position.</p> <p>Start with your dog standing, then ask her to lie down. Watch how she moves into a down. If she sits first (many dogs do this because they have been trained to lie down after a sit and thus they expect you to ask for a sit first), you may need to rename this behavior and teach it as if it is new. However, you may only need to separate the down from the sit.</p> <p>How-to-teach suggestion: You may lure your dog into a down (from a <i>stand</i>) by taking a treat in your hand, placing it on her nose (just so she knows it is there), and s-l-o-w-l-y lowering the treat diagonally to the floor toward her chest and behind her front feet. Move slowly enough so that her nose can touch the treat the entire time she is going down (rather than moving your hand quickly down to the floor).</p> <p>If needed, you may touch your dog’s belly lightly to keep her from sitting first. Keeping your hand <i>lightly</i> on her belly (not pushing up!) may help her fold down rather than sit. If you put too much pressure up on her belly, however, she is unlikely to lie down. This new behavior may be confusing to your dog for a while, since to her the “rules” have changed and she has to figure out the new rules.</p> <p>Going from a stand to a down is one repetition.</p> <p>Initially as your dog is learning the fold down as a new behavior, simply move away from your dog to get her to stand up (rather than asking for a stand). Or toss the treat away from her so that she stands up to get to the treat. This allows you to work on only one behavior at a time (fold down) and reduces confusion for your dog.</p> <p>Once your dog has mastered the fold down, then you can add in your cue for stand. You may have noticed that dogs naturally rise up fully into a stand rather than sitting first and then standing up. If your dog has already mastered the kick-back stand, your dog may generalize your “stand” cue into rising from a down as well as moving out of a sit. We want your dog to simply rise up from the down, keeping her feet in the same position as when she was lying down, positioned naturally beneath her shoulders and hips.</p> <p>At this early stage, going from a stand to a down and back up to a stand is one repetition.</p> <p>Here is a video example: <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dK4MMavFPv8">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dK4MMavFPv8</a></p>

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<p><b>Cookie Stretches – Sides</b></p> <p>Cookie stretches to the sides work on spinal flexibility in the thoracic, lumbar, and possibly sacral areas.</p>	<p>The goal is for your dog to have balance and spinal flexibility from side to side, stretching to place his nose adjacent to his shoulders, ribs, and hips while keeping his back legs stationary.</p> <p>How-to-teach suggestion: Get two small “cookies” (treats) ready. Set up your dog so that he is standing with his spine straight, perhaps with one side along a wall. Hold a treat in front of his nose so that he knows it is there, then slowly move the treat toward the shoulder on the room side (not the wall side). As he follows the treat, slowly and smoothly bring the treat back toward the end of his ribs, then back toward his hips. Feed him the treat at the end. Here is a video example: <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5zS-xqm8ro">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5zS-xqm8ro</a> If you place your arm under your dog’s belly, be careful <i>not</i> to push your dog’s belly <i>up</i>.</p> <p>Doing a stretch from shoulder to rib to hip on <i>both sides</i> of his body is one repetition.</p>
<p><b>Cookie Stretches – Up &amp; Down</b></p> <p>Cookie stretches up and down work on spinal flexibility in the cervical and thoracic areas.</p>	<p>The goal is for your dog to have neck flexibility with his nose pointed up in the air (12:00 on a clock face) as well as pointed down toward the ground and tucked into his chest (6:00 on a clock face). We want a neutral topline and straight spine from shoulders to hips.</p> <p>How-to-teach suggestion: Get several small “cookies” ready. Set up your dog so that he is standing with his spine straight, perhaps with one side along a wall. Hold a treat in front of your dog’s nose so that he knows it is there, then slowly move the treat straight up in the air and a tiny bit back toward his shoulders. If you move the treat too far away from his nose, he may try to jump or back up, so try to keep the treat basically on his nose. Feed him the treat at the end.</p> <p>Then move the treat down and in toward his chest to get him to tuck his chin to his chest. Feed him the treat at the end. (Bringing the chin between the front legs [like in the video listed in the previous exercise] is a separate exercise in my opinion.)</p> <p>Doing one stretch up and <i>three</i> down is one repetition. (Dogs already get lots of practice looking up when they check in with us!)</p>
<p><b>Standing with Front Feet Elevated</b></p> <p>Elevating the front feet works on balance and hind-end strength.</p>	<p>The goal is for your dog to have a natural stance with neutral topline and head position. The height of the platform depends on the dog’s strength. Start low (a book) and gradually raise the elevation (a platform). Make sure both the floor and the raised area have secure footing.</p> <p>Start 1 ½ to 2 body lengths away and lead your dog straight onto the item so that just the front feet are on the item and he is standing straight. Stand close enough to your dog so that his weight shifts back onto his hind limbs instead of leaning forward. Have him stay in position for a few seconds to a minute, then allow him to get off and rest before stepping up again.</p> <p>Standing on the item, staying, then getting off is one repetition. This exercise can be a part of daily exercises for virtually every dog until end-of-life.</p>

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<p><b>Cavalettis</b></p> <p>Walking over cavalettis (poles) provides exercise in balance and proprioception.</p>	<p>The goal is to have all four limbs moving in a continuous, straight, forward motion over a minimum of four cavalettis (poles) with straight spine and neutral head position. The distance between the poles is your dog's height at her withers. This is her natural gait.</p> <p>Place 4-6 cavaletti poles (broom sticks work) on the floor (if raised, raise no more than an inch) so that the poles are stationary on the ground. Set up your dog facing the row of cavalettis about 1 ½ to 2 body lengths away from the end of the row. Assure that her spine is straight, not curved. (If you have trained your dog to go to a target, you may place a target about 1.5-2 body lengths away from each end of the row. This gives her targets to go to so that you can send her to the targets rather than walking back and forth with her. This also allows you to reward her at the end of two passes instead of after each pass.) Walk with her to the end of the row, going about 2 body lengths after the end of the poles, then turn around and go back to the beginning. Your dog may be either on- or off-leash. (You will learn if you need to be close to your dog and step over the cavalettis, too, or if you can be far enough away that you avoid the cavalettis yourself.)</p> <p>You may find that you need to start by having your dog trot over the cavalettis rather than walk. The goal is to get her to walk over them, as walking over cavalettis is harder than trotting. Be sure to go with her forward over the poles the first time so that she knows they are there. After a few trotting passes, ask her to walk slowly over the poles. As she finishes going over the last pole, keep her moving 1-2 body lengths beyond the last pole to help her stay straight, then ask her to turn around and go over them again.</p> <p>Going over the cavalettis one time in <i>both</i> directions is one repetition.</p>