

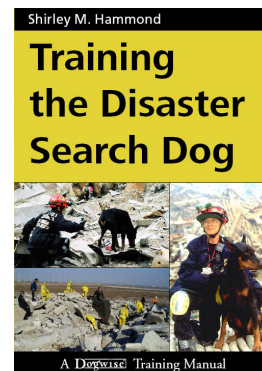
An excerpt from

Disaster Search Dog Training

Chapter 2

by Shirley M. Hammond, Dogwise Publishing. 800-776-2665, www.dogwise.com

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Basic Obedience Principles and Techniques

All dogs—including DSDs—should receive basic obedience instruction. You want your dog to perform such skills as sit, stay, come, leave it, and off reliably on command. There are many good books and trainers that can help you with basic obedience and it is beyond the scope of this book to go into this in detail given that our focus here is on the unique skills that a DSD requires. Please refer to the Association of Pet Dog Trainers (APDT) website at www.apdt.com for a list of references. *I recommend enrolling in an obedience class.* APDT also maintains a detailed list of certified dog trainers on its website.

While I will refer you elsewhere for basic obedience, I do have some favorite principles and techniques of dog training that I believe have real relevance to training disaster search dogs. These include:

- *Dogs are “place learners.” This means they generally learn more quickly in their primary area for training and may not be able to perform well elsewhere without additional training.* This is both good and bad. You may have heard someone say, “My dog does it perfectly at home”. The handler is not just giving an excuse. Most likely, the dog does perform perfectly at home. The problem is that the training has not been complete. The dog has not learned to generalize the training to other locations, a key skill for a DSD. To generalize the training, the dog must be able to work or perform a behavior under different circumstances and in different locations. Once the dog is performing the behavior 95% of the time correctly in one location, it is time to begin training at a new location. In the beginning, I use a 3 to 1 ratio. Train the dog three times in the primary area and then once in a new location. This is a big change for the dog so be sure to keep the training simple. Lower the performance criteria you expect from the dog when training in a new environment so that he can be successful. Gradually increase the

number of new places that you train a specific behavior.

- *Only change one variable or train one behavior at a time while the dog is learning a new set of behaviors.* For instance, your goal may be to teach the dog to sit and stay while the handler walks 10 yards away. This adds up to three individual behaviors and each individual behavior can be separated into many small steps. Each of these behaviors needs to be trained separately and then chained (put together) one at a time. First, teach the dog to sit. Next, teach the dog to stay in the position with the handler in front of the dog. And finally, have the dog sit/stay while the handler gradually increases the distance between himself and the dog until he reaches the 10-yard goal. Learning the behaviors separately and then chaining them in a sequence is how dogs learn complex behaviors best. The more that is understood about how the dog learns, the better trainers are able to effectively teach their dogs.
- *When you change or add variables you need to lower the criteria for the trained behavior.* Changing locations is a big variable for the beginning dog. Anticipate that the dog will not work as well in the new location. This means that you must make the problem very simple and gradually make it more complex.

The Role of Clicker Training and Operant Conditioning

While training working dogs like Disaster Search Dogs have not historically involved the use of modern positive techniques, I recommend that trainers become familiar with the operant conditioning techniques as taught by proponents like Karen Pryor and others. I have found these methods make for a more successful training experience and there are a number of clicker training references, including videos, recommended on the APDT website.

Clicker training involves a set of scientific principles describing the development of behavior in which the animal “operates” on the environment, instead of the other way around. Karen Pryor states in her book *Clicker Training for Dogs* that clicker training is the dog trainer’s slang for operant conditioning. The “click” is used to mark the exact behavior you want the dog to exhibit at precisely the time the behavior occurs. This is always followed by some type of positive reinforcement in the form of a treat, praise or access to a toy. It is like taking a picture; what you see is what you get. Clicker training is a powerful tool for teaching new behaviors. Some handlers may choose to use another sound instead of a clicker, but keep in mind that the timing of the click or word is the most important element in your training and most experts agree timing is better with the clicker.

Clicker training methods can be used for obedience, agility, and it is a great tool for training direction and control. If you plan to use the clicker, the dog must be introduced to the clicker before you can begin training the disaster skills. Start the training in your house or kitchen by simply clicking the clicker and immediately giving the dog a tiny, moist treat. Do not use dry cookies for this training. The chewing and swallowing detracts from the focus of the training. Continue pairing food with the click for three minutes and then put it away. Wait a few minutes and when the dog is not looking, click; the dog should come running to get a treat. If the dog doesn’t come for the treat, repeat the three-minute training session again and then wait as before to test whether the dog has made the connection. What you have just taught your dog is that the click means a reward/food has been earned. You can use this tool to perfect obedience skills, i.e., come, sit, watch me, touch, turn, down, stay close, as well as parlor games like play dead.

Disaster Search Training Elements

Once a solid foundation of basic obedience is achieved, our focus will move to the following training elements:

- The Bark Alert - an audible trained behavior.
- Agility - to negotiate the rubble confidently and safely.
- Direction and Control - to take direction from the handler, both verbal and hand signals.
- Search, Find, and Alert on exposed or buried victims in the rubble within the handler’s sight.

- Search, Find, and Alert on exposed of buried victims out of the handler’s sight.

I recommend working on one element at a time while training. For example, work on agility and then direction and control in the morning. End your sessions with bark alert training. In the afternoons, move to a rubble field and work finding “victims” in the rubble. There are many options that can fit your personal schedule, but the important point is to follow a plan and be as consistent as possible. A training plan that takes small steps many times a week will get you to the desired end result more successfully than if you become very intense in your training program. The secret is to always quit when the dog is having success. Don’t get caught in that “I’ll just try one more time” syndrome. We will now turn to each of these specific skills in the following chapters.

Taken from *Training the Disaster Search Dog*, \$29.95. Available from Dogwise Publishing, www.dogwise.com or 1-800-776-2665.

Author **Shirley Hammond** is known world-wide for her expertise in training DSD teams. She has dedicated years of her life to developing and using the training techniques she details in this book. Shirley has been a key member of the FEMA, Task Force and has helped develop standards and testing techniques for DSD work both nationally and internationally. Currently she is giving seminars on Disaster Search Dog training and Human Remains Detection.