When a new puppy comes into our lives and we give him a name, most of us think the more we repeat the name to the dog, the faster he will learn it. Unfortunately, that theory falls flat when put into practice. Just think of all the hundreds, perhaps thousands, of words you say around your dog all day long, none of which are meant for your dog. How can he discern which words are intended to have meaning for him versus those that aren’t? There is no way he could intuitively know. So, how do we teach our dogs their names? How do we make that one sound (their name) something to which they readily and happily respond? There are specific things you can do to help teach your dog his name and to get a great response every single time you say it.

Dogs are typically motivated by food. In some (less frequent) instances, dogs are not motivated by food at all and instead they’re motivated by toys, movement or sound. In any case, you need to discover your particular dog’s preference and use that motivation to get his attention when teaching his name. For this discussion, let’s assume you have a typical dog who is motivated by food. To maximize his motivation, be sure to only do this exercise BEFORE his meal. If he goes into this exercise hungry, his motivation is likely to be much higher than if he just ate. This is important; especially with smaller dogs whose stomachs are smaller and fill up quicker.

Step 1:
Put a leash on your dog and take him to a room with few or no distractions. Step on the leash nice and short but leave enough length for him to stand up, turn around, and lie down. That’s going to be plenty of leash for this exercise. Have some treats in your treat bag hanging on your belt behind you, out of your dog’s line of sight. I like to start this exercise as soon as I get a new puppy in which case, the dog is likely to be quite small in stature. I like to kneel down in front of him to get closer and thereby gain his interest much easier than if my face is farther away – for example, if I was standing up. If you’re working with a larger dog or if you are particularly short, you may want to stand up. Use your best judgment.

Put a treat in your hand and hold it briefly to your dog’s nose – long enough for him to take note of it and become interested – then bring the treat up to your face. Touch your cheek with the treat just beside your mouth and hold it there. Typically, this movement of the treat from your dog’s nose to your cheek will bring his attention to your face. Now watch your dog’s eyes. You should watch for his gaze to shift from the treat in your hand to your eyes. Watch closely and you’ll see it happen, eventually. Your dog should have an expression of, “What are you waiting for? I see the treat! Give it to me!” Yes, that’s the look you’re watching for!

The moment your dog looks at you instead of the treat, quickly bring the treat down to his face so he can eat it, smile brightly at him, and say his name sweetly in your best high-pitched voice as you feed him the treat. Don’t hold back with the joy. Say his name in your happiest tone with your most joyous facial expression. Make sure you say his name in your best high-pitched voice with as much enthusiasm as you can muster—and feed him! Make it a party with clowns (in your mind, at least)! Your dog may then look at you as if to say, “What? Why are you so excited? I just looked at you. Why are you acting so excited?” But don’t worry. Your dog will soon get the idea that it IS a big deal when he looks at you every time he hears the sound of his name.

Repeat these steps several times—maybe 10 repetitions or so. Then move on to the next step.

If you were on your knees, stand up. If you were already standing up for the first part of this exercise, move a bit further away from your dog for this part. A bit of distance from your dog puts your face farther away from your dog and increases the difficulty of this exercise because it demands that your dog maintain his focus at a greater distance than before. From this increased distance, the exercise is pretty much the same as before. Put a treat in your hand, put it on your dog’s nose to gain his attention and interest, then bring the treat up to your cheek and hold it there until your dog looks at your face. When he looks at your face, say his name in a sweet and happy tone and quickly bring the treat down to his face so he can eat it. Make a big smile big and make him believe you are so very pleased that he looked at you. You’ll know you have connected with him by his ears and the wag of his tail.

I like to repeat this step of the Name Game 8 to 10 times or so, until my dog is consistently looking at me in a short amount of time. Once I have achieved this goal, I move on to the next step.

Step 2:
Now we increase the difficulty just a bit more. I stand upright in front of my dog. I hold a treat in my hand. I take the treat and put it on my dog’s nose to get his attention. Then, instead of bringing the treat up to my cheek, I hold the treat with my arm stretched out to my side. This takes the treat away from my face. Typically, the dog will stare at the treat in my hand and not look at my face. This is pretty normal – at first. I hold that position and say nothing. I just wait. And wait. And maybe wait some more. At some point, my dog is likely to look away from the
Name Game (Teaching Your Dog His Name)

treat and glance at my face. The moment he does this, I say his name sweetly, smile my biggest smile, and quickly deliver the treat to him! This is a breakthrough! I’m always so happy! My dog has put it together and figured out what I’ve been looking for.

You’re going to want to do this exercise once per day for several days in a row. I would estimate this will take a week or more to consistently establish your dog’s name as a recognizable prompt for him to turn and look at you, expecting something good is about to happen. You want to do this exercise until your dog knows his name and loves it. You want him to recognize his name as a great thing and his response should be to turn from whatever he’s offering his attention and put it back on you.

If you use your dog’s name for corrections, your dog will quickly learn to avoid you when you say his name. You can test this by saying his name and watching his response. Then try, “Good boy!” or “Good girl!” and watch our dog’s response. If you get nothing in response to his name but he turns toward you wagging his tail when you say, “Good boy!” you know you have some work to do. Please avoid using your dog’s name when correcting him. Use some other word such as “No” or “Don’t” or “Stop” or anything else – just don’t use his name. His name is very special and should only be used when you have something good in store for your dog.