



By Jeannie Biggers, photos by Shannon Englund

What is the spot box? Just PVC pipe in a box formation! The basic box size is 2 feet x 3.5 feet, but size can vary depending on dog size. When taking the spot box to the step of actual contact training, I like to have a box that is 1 foot x 3.5 feet (for the dogwalk) as well as one that's 3 feet x 3.5 feet (for the A-frame).



An A-frame box and a dogwalk box.

There are some great trainers using the same type of prop to teach their preferred contact behavior. What I'm presenting here are my steps for using a PVC box to teach a 4-on contact behavior—but before you say, "Well, I don't want a 4-on contact." Hear me out. I have incorporated steps into my spot box training that go beyond teaching a contact behavior; for example, I have added steps to rear-end awareness, ability to collect using the rear end, and the ability to think while in motion as well as when the handler is in motion, to name a few.

What do you need to know to teach a spot box?

- A good understanding of how to shape a behavior
- Patience
- Time
- A willing teammate

What does your dog need to learn a spot box?

- Nothing. We will start out with the basic steps that you need to move forward.

- A puppy can start the very basic steps as young as 6 months (some pups younger, depending on how they are maturing with their ability to learn).

What equipment will you need?

- A rubber pan of some sort. I use rubber feed pans which you can find at your local ranch or feed store. The size of feed pan you need depends on the size of your dog. You are going to shape your dog to put two front feet on the pan, so the larger your dog the larger the feed pan you will need and the smaller the dog the smaller the pan can be. I have three sizes that can be turned upside down and stacked on one another to form a pyramid.



Rubber feed pans.



Front feet on a pan.



All feet on a pan; your dog can choose his position.



Rear feet on stacked pans.

- A basic size PVC box (2 feet x 3.5 feet) or an A-frame size box. It is best to use 3-way connectors for the corners of the box because it will raise your box just a bit off the floor.

Rubber Feed Pan Work

You want this initial work to be relatively easy for the dog so use an appropriate size pan for your dog; don't start a large dog with a small pan. As your dog progresses, however, you can make it harder by decreasing the size of the pan or by stacking multiple pans.

I am going to assume you know how to shape a behavior so I won't go into that process here. You can use a verbal cue or use a clicker, whichever is more comfortable for you and your dog.

The feed pan steps to shape are as follows:

1. Two front feet on
2. Four feet on
3. Two back feet on

Front feet on is usually easy for the dog. It seems that even as baby pups, dogs understand they have front feet even when they have no clue there are two more in the back! This is our goal with the feed pans: connect the back end to the brain. You will notice that asking for four on is also fairly easy because the back feet can just follow the front feet. But when you start asking your dog to perform using just his back feet, the brain really has to start working. This step takes the longest and needs the most time and patience from you.

Don't mistake rear-end awareness with the ability to back your dog up onto an object. I want the dog to actually feel with and then place his back feet. This is when we know he has a connection between his back

feet and his brain; this is rear-end awareness in my opinion.

Note: This step is quite important. Don't bypass it because it seems silly or your dog is having trouble. Dogs mature and learn to learn at different rates. Keep working for rear end connectivity to the brain. It will have big payoffs in agility including the ability to collect for contact performance and weave pole entry, perform tight turns, etc.

Basic Spot Box Training Concepts

There are a few basic concepts that are important for all steps of the spot box training:

- Once your dog understands the box, all four feet must be *in* the box to earn a reward. Don't let him cheat by stepping on the sides of the box or by hanging his front feet out if he chooses to lie down. We want dogs to understand there is a boundary for all four feet.
- Don't ask for a position in the box; let the dog choose: stand, sit, down. You may see that your dog will choose a different position as you progress. Your dog knows what is most comfortable for his body, so if he chooses the position he has a much better chance at being successful.
- Never say multiple commands. The command you choose means "go to the box and stop." It is the only cue you use until you are ready to release your dog. This will become apparent when you start asking your dog to stay in the box while you move. People want to tell their dog to wait after they have already given the command for the box—don't do this!

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on dog size.**

- Always release your dog from the box with a verbal cue; *never* let him leave the box on his own accord. OK, release, free, and break, are just a few examples of release words you might choose.
- Make sure the box is the “best place on earth.” Box work should always be a fun exercise for both dog and handler.

Introduce the Spot Box



If you did your feed pan homework and your dog understands he has four feet, getting him to understand that he goes into the box is usually easy. You do it the same way you shape any other behavior. Here are some tips to remember while you're shaping:

- You need to be able to give your dog information when he is right—a “yes” or a click—as well as when he is not quite right—an “oops” or another word. The word is *not* intended to be a correction, just information that he isn't on the right track. If you give your dog information, he can learn and think.
- Start close to your dog and the box. You are not moving in this step.
- Once your dog consistently offers going into the box without stepping on the PVC or hanging over it, name the behavior. I use “spot,” but you can choose whatever word you want: mark, touch, and hit it, are just a few examples.
- Gradually increase how long you have the dog stay in the box before releasing him with his verbal cue.
- Remember: *always* release your dog from the box.

Once your dog can go into the box with you close by and not moving, and stay in the box until you release him, you can go to the next step.

Adding Distance

Now we want the dog to understand that he can go to the box, stop with all feet inside, and wait for his release no matter where you are in relation to the box. You are not moving in this step.

- Start one step away from the spot box instead of being next to it and give your dog his “spot” cue. At this point we don't care if your dog goes to the box and turns and looks at you, we just want him to go into the box with all four feet and stop. If he moves around in the box, that is okay, as long as they stays *in* the box.
- If your dog steps out of the box, just say “oops” or use whatever marker word you have chosen. Keep this positive! We want the dog to *want* to learn what he is doing wrong and think about how to fix it for himself. We don't want to “mechanically” put him back in the box; what I mean by that is using your body pressure to make him put all four feet back in the box.
- Encourage your dog to think!
- Work up to being able to send your dog to his “spot” from many different angles, and from both sides of your body.
- Gradually add more distance between you and the box until you can start from about 15 feet way or so.
- During this stage, always release your dog from the box to come back to you for his reward.

The next step is for you to start moving.

Adding Handler Movement after the “Spot”

We now have a dog that understands to go into the box, get all four feet in, and wait until you release him from a distance.

- Go back in close to the box and give your “spot” cue. Once your dog is in the box, take a step forward to put yourself in motion. As you step, watch your dog. We want the dog to stay in the box.
- If your dog starts to come out give your marker word for an incorrect attempt in a gentle voice. Once he is back in the box, give him a “yes” and try to take a step again. As you step, watch your dog. If you see him start to move, give your “oops” again. Don't mechanically put him back in the box, let him figure it out. Think of this stage just like teaching your dog a stay.
- Gradually increase your distance from the box and take more steps after your dog is in the box until you can send him to the spot box from anywhere and move around while he waits for his release.
- During this stage vary between going to your dog and treating him, and releasing him to come back to you for his treat.

Adding Handler Movement before the “Spot”

Now we are ready to try moving with the dog. I find this is the hardest step and takes the most time and patience from *you!* This step gets your dog to be able to think while both of you are in motion.

- Start about 5 feet or so from the box.
- As you send your dog to the box, keep moving on the same path. Start at a walk rather than trying to run.
- Again, as you move, if your dog wants to come out of the box give your “oops” or chosen marker word. You will need to stop while he corrects himself then take a step again.
- Gradually increase your speed as you run parallel to the dog.
- Gradually work until you can continue to move past the box while your dog collects and stops with all four feet in the box.



Hoop, box, hoop sequence

- Don't forget to always release your dog with a verbal cue.
- Also vary your position in relation to your dog.
- During this stage vary between going to your dog and treating him, and releasing him to come back to you for his treat. *But*, when you go the box to treat him, always go back to your original position before you release him.

Adding Hoops

Now we will add hoops, one before the box and one after. Start by just having them 10 feet from the box. As your dog gets comfortable, increase the distance. We want to start creating speed into and out of the box as well as changing up your speed.

This step really starts helping the dog understand to stay straight in the box. You can use a target after the second hoop if you wish.



Spot box on the dogwalk.

- Start close to your dog then start adding distance and varying your position.
- Watch for your dog to collect going into the box using his rear end. We don't want the dog to slam into the box on his front end. If this is happening, you need to go back and work rear-end awareness more.
- Watch for your dog to really drive out of the box. Use a target to help with this if necessary.

Multiple Boxes

If you have multiple boxes or a friend who has a box or two, set up a Hoopers type course with multiple boxes. This will get your dog to understand that during a course you will be asking for a "spot" and they will need to collect and stop and then drive out again. This really helps your dog learn to think while in motion, to collect when needed, and drive out from a stop. It also helps with impulse control while *you* are in motion.



Spot box on the A-frame. Notice that the top bar has been removed.

Note: I do all of these steps with the A-frame sized box first and then I will go back and do them with the dogwalk-sized box. The steps go much quicker the second time as the dog already understands what is being asked, they just have to be more aware of where all four feet are.

Contacts

Once I have gone through the previous stages of training, I add my boxes to the contacts. For the A-frame, I remove the top piece on the box. I have found that dogs catch toes if you leave the top bar on.

Fading the Box?

I have been asked if you need to "fade" the box? I have not found that much fading is necessary as there is a "box" on every contact out there. Train it and trust it!

Thank you and I hope you enjoy your journey! 🐾

My name is Jeannie Biggers and I live in beautiful Bozeman, Montana. I started agility in 2005 with my first Australian Shepherd. On most weekends you can find me judging or competing at agility or herding trials, or working my Aussies and Border Collies for fun. I have placed in the top three at the NADAC Championships six times I have put 28 Trial Championships on dogs and I also have the #19 MODSQUAD dog. I own and operate GotDog? LLC. We host four agility trials a year as well as offer agility classes, seminars, and private lessons. I can be contacted at jeannie@gotdogllc.com or http://gotdogllc.com.

