



# Banbury-Bedrock Bull Terriers

## Automatic Check In by

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Mutual awareness, a system of communication and recognition of leadership are components of a relationship that you want to develop with your dog. One of the tools to accomplish this goal is the automatic check-in. A dog who, without prompting, offers the behavior of eye contact with its leader is giving an automatic check-in (auto check-in).

An auto check-in is a naturally occurring behavior for puppies. Puppies begin displaying auto check-ins with their mother as soon as they can see, around 14 days. While they are with their mother they are continuously giving eye contact and she continuously rewards the puppies to reinforce these auto check-ins. For example, mom has a toy and puppy comes forward with eye contact that says "Please may I have that toy?". It is likely that mom will either avert her eyes, turn her head or get up and leave the toy for the puppy, thereby saying "sure you can". On the other hand, as teacher and leader, with just a look mom can send the message "No, you cannot have that toy now." It is the auto check-in and her responses to this behavior that allow her to teach her puppies about safety, appropriate behavior and boundaries.

As the puppies age they begin to become aware of their environment and littermates. It is within the social context of their littermates that they expand their opportunities to practice auto check-ins. Eye contact with a littermate may be communicating the desire, "Gee, I really would love to play with you and that toy that you are playing with". In response, the littermate's eye contact may be all that is needed to let the puppy know "sure you can join and play with me and the toy" or "don't even think about it". This is a skill that is learned and then practiced amongst dogs throughout their lifetime. Under-socialized dogs can become poor readers and communicators, leading to a host of potential problems.

When your puppy comes home between 7 and 10 weeks, he is frequently under foot offering auto check-ins, looking for approval and guidance. He will take his cues from other dogs in the house, cats and of course humans. What tends to happen is that we do not reinforce the auto check-in frequently enough. If auto check-ins are not captured and rewarded, the behavior with you, the leader, will extinguish as your puppy matures and becomes more independent.

### What are the benefits of the Auto Check In?

1. Relationship Information – The auto check-in acknowledges you as the leader and decision maker in the relationship. Leaders pay attention and they make appropriate decisions for the safety and well being of their followers. Spot's auto check-in may indicate he is looking to you as the decision maker when he is wanting to do something, i.e., go outside, come inside, get a toy, play fetch, play with another dog, go for a swim. Your response provides sought after information for Spot, be it allowing or denying the request.

2. Situational Information- A dog who offers auto check-ins may be letting his handler know that he is feeling uncomfortable about something in the environment, i.e., an approaching dog, a child on a bicycle, new surroundings, construction work, loud traffic. The handler is able to acknowledge the information and make situational adjustments, such as providing a wider berth when passing the construction site. This, in turn, will have a positive effect on Spot, letting him know you will Pilot him to a more comfortable zone.

3. Relationship Strengthening- When Spot offers an auto check-in and you respond you are strengthening the communication bond between the two of you. The fact that Spot is able to look to you for guidance tells you that he trusts your decisions.

4. Freedom-As Spot offers you auto check-ins, you are able to give him more freedom, knowing that he will check-in and not make his own decisions. A dog that does not offer auto check-ins will often be more drawn by his environment and consequently will make decisions without your input, decisions that can get him into trouble.

5. Owner Awareness-Auto check-in encourages you, the owner, to pay attention to your dog and the environment. If you are otherwise engaged, as in chatting on your cell phone or listening to your I-Pod, the auto check-ins will be missed and the behavior will extinguish itself as Spot will redirect his focus from you to the environment.

This is a two party game; both human and canine must participate for auto check in to be successful.

#### Capture and Reward Auto Check-Ins

The best part about an auto check-in is that it is never too late to have this spontaneous, natural eye contact become a meaningful communication tool in your relationship. The more auto check-ins that can be captured and rewarded, the more auto check-ins Spot will offer.

Start with you and Spot in a quiet room. Sit in a chair for a short time while ignoring Spot. Then, get up from the chair. If Spot offers an auto check-in, as if to say “where are you going?” give him a “YES” and a high value food reward, while telling him how fabulous he is. Do this several times a day, adding a couple of different rooms each day. Every once in a while give him a JACKPOT REWARD (5-10 high value tiny treats given in rapid fire succession). Try walking with Spot from one room to another. Stop walking and wait for an auto check-in. If Spot gives you an auto check-in, say “YES” and reward with high value treats and 15-30 seconds of verbal praise. After a few days of this you should start to notice that Spot offers auto check-ins more frequently. Every auto check-in that you capture earns a reward.

Now it is time to move to a slightly more distracting situation. Snap on Spots leash and walk him toward the door like he is going for a walk. Before you get to the door, stop and wait for Spot to offer an auto check-in. After 10 seconds of waiting, if Spot has not offered the behavior, make a noise or tap him lightly on his side or back between his hip bones to interrupt his outward focus. As soon as Spot offers the auto check-in, say, “YES” and give him a JACKPOT reward. Soon, this will be the perfect opportunity to use a “Life Reward” (see Tool Box, below). When Spot offers auto check-ins as a “May I?” at the door, reward by opening the door so he can go out and play. Sometimes you will not be able to grant Spot’s request. In these situations, still honor the auto check-in with “YES” and a substitute reward.

## What is Reinforcement?

Reinforcement is anything that increases the frequency of a behavior. Food (treats) is a great high quality reward that will reinforce a behavior for many dogs. It can be a great tool to cement a behavior. That said there are many other rewards that can be used to reinforce behaviors. Anything that your dog likes can be used as a reward and thus a reinforcement of behavior. Different breeds of dogs as well as individuals within that breed find different things rewarding. For example, retrievers like to swim; therefore they will offer behaviors to earn a swim. A swim is not a reward for most Pekinese, but a cuddle on a lap would be.

Spend some time thinking about what YOUR dog finds to be a reinforcing reward in any particular environment. Maybe Spot offers auto check-ins in the house and is happy to work for low-level rewards such as praise or his own dog food. On the street where there is a higher level of distraction, in order to get auto check-ins you may need a higher value reward, like baked chicken, roast beef or hotdogs.

Remember to reward the behavior with the appropriate level of reinforcement, so the behavior repeats itself. For example, on a walk through town (a very distracting environment) if Spot offers a desirable behavior, such as an auto check-in, and a low level reward (praise) is the paycheck Spot will stop offering the behavior. Focusing on his environment is more reinforcing. However, if a high level reward is given, it is more likely that Spot will offer more auto check-ins.

## What's in Your Tool Box?

Develop a toolbox of rewards that suits your individual dog and can be used to reinforce desirable behaviors. Some possible rewards include treats, toys, verbal praise, belly-rubs and cuddling. Games and activities, such as retrieving, hunting, walks, car rides, swims and hide-and-seek also make great reward tools for your box. Additionally, the simple joy of one more swim or one more retrieve can also be a reward. Life Rewards are things Spot may take for granted like his meals, being allowed to go outside to play, coming inside from the yard, putting on a leash to go for a walk, being let out of the car, being let out of his crate or just about any other thing that Spot needs/wants in his day to day of life. When you are using Life Rewards to reinforce desirable behaviors you wait until Spot asks for something. Going for a walk is a good example. When it is time for Spot's walk he may be excited and jumping around. Look at Spot and ask for a behavior that he knows solidly (we want Spot to be successful) such as "SIT". If Spot sits, say "YES" and give him a Life Reward: snap on his leash to take him for a walk. If you have a jumpy, bouncy dog, the same concept will work well at mealtime. If Spot refuses or breaks the "SIT" at the door or at mealtime, simply walk away and return in a minute to try to elicit the behavior. Spot needs to say "Please" when he is asking for something.

Use the following chart to help you fill your toolbox with things your dog finds rewarding. Keep in mind, that you know your dog best. Try to find out what things YOUR dog finds the most rewarding. Place this chart on your refrigerator and try to use all of your tools as rewards instead of getting trapped into only giving one kind of reward.

## My Tool Box

Treats Toys Games Activities Life Rewards