

MOVE THE PIG

Move the Pig 101: Teaching the Pig to Move

Written by Lydia Weaver, Copyright 2014. Sharing and posting of this file for informational purposes is welcomed. No commercial purpose may be made of this file without the express written permission of the author.

Teaching our pigs to move when and where we ask is just like teaching any other behavior we want. Our goal should be to break the exercise down into tiny pieces the pig can absorb, then once he grasps the basic concept we work toward putting the pieces together to shape the behavior further. To put this in relatable terms it's very similar to teaching a child her ABCs. When that task is mastered, she can move on to writing words, then sentences, then paragraphs. We teach small steps, then string them together to complete a task.

This first set of instructions is geared toward the pig that simply needs to learn to move for us, as well as her owner, who needs to learn to move her confidently. For a pig that has already established unwanted behaviors, like head swiping or biting, we make just a couple of adjustments, which I will outline later.

This is all perfectly natural for a pig; as a herd animal he innately understands that moving when asked is conceding power to you. That is instinctive; it's pig herd language 101. What we're doing is connecting a natural and very desired behavior to specific cues or signals so that we can calmly use that behavior to our advantage in a variety of situations we are undoubtedly going to encounter as pig owners. This is NOT showing him who's boss, being top hog or being alpha pig. This is simply leading our pigs in a direction they can understand and in which we want or need for them to go.

First and foremost, it is essential that we begin teaching any behavior in a calm environment. While MTP is extremely effective in preventing and changing unwanted behavior, like biting or head swiping, we sure don't want to try MTP for the first time right after any altercation with the pig. Trying to do this is akin to having an elementary school student take an English test right after having a heated argument or fight on the playground. His mind is not receptive to processing anything new in that moment.

Choose instead a calm time and place when both of you are relaxed. In the beginning we're going to give several very clear signals or cues to alert the pig that something should be happening. She won't understand what they mean at first, but that's expected. We'll make it clear to her very quickly. As we advance in teaching this and she understands more of what we want, we can refine the signals and ask for more effort from her.

So the pig is chilled, maybe having a nap, maybe just snuffling about doing piggy things. The first thing I want to do is to increase my presence and energy. Instead of just pattering about, I'm going to step toward him with authority, even thudding my feet a bit heavily. Then I give a verbal signal. Choose one that you can live with because you'll use it often with this program. I say "come on, let's go, let's go!" in an authoritative voice. It does not need to be a yell or shout, but it does need to impart a sense of urgency, like you don't have all day to wait, because you don't. When you ask for movement, for it to be effective, it needs to happen immediately. I also will clap my hands or give a clucking sound, like someone urging a horse into a trot. I have no idea how to spell that sound, so I'll go for the description, instead.

So count those up: feet, voice, clap and/or cluck. That's three, possibly four strong signals if you use them all, which alert the pig that something should be happening. She doesn't have a clue what that is yet, but by the time you take several animated, marching-type steps to get to her, she's on alert, and may well have stood up if she was previously lying down. This is great, it's what we want. If she happens to move away a couple of steps, you can stop there. If not, you add another cue for her. Keep encouraging her with your previous signals, and walk firmly into her bubble, her personal space. If she does not move away, step right into her, being careful not to trip over the pig. She will likely give a squeal or grunt of surprise and jump away. As soon as he moves even a step or two away from you, immediately stop your movement and stop your signals. Make it very defined, like someone unexpectedly pulled the plug on your power source.

~ continued on next page ~

MOVE THE PIG

(....continued from previous page....) Tell him "good" or "good boy" so he has a verbal affirmation that he did what you wanted. Take a deep breath and blow it out.

When you stop, you release the pressure you were applying to have her move. She does not learn to move from the pressure you're applying, she learns from you releasing that pressure the instant she does what you want. The pressure is to create the movement, but the release of pressure is the reward. She will repeat what she gets rewarded for. We want her to come to the conclusion that "OH! When I move my feet, she stops!"

If your pig is one of the more dominant types that has begun or even has firmly established dangerous behaviors like biting or head swiping, we simply add a sorting board to our tool box for safety. The steps to move him are identical, with the exception that you'll be holding the sorting board between yourself and the pig. In that type of pig, you're much more likely to get a reaction instead of action. He may well swing around and confront you when you get into his space, and in that case you would simply keep the sorting board between you and his head, and carry on. As you step, you'll bump-bump-bump into him with every step. If he resists, and he probably will, it is perfectly permissible to increase the pressure until you get the desired effect. If we stay static at the same level of pressure he's resisting, we actually teach him to resist to that level and even a step above it. If we increase the pressure onward and upward, we will eventually find the spot where he decides the payoff for unwanted behavior is not worth the effort. So if bump-bump-bump does not get immediate results, you go to bump-Bump-BUMP. If he's still in the naughty zone, banging his noggin' on that sorting board, you step it up to BUMP-BUMP-BUMP. We need to leave no doubt that we expect him to move and move now.

Then just as with the more docile, calmer pig, the moment she backs up a step or two, or even turns, we stop and give our verbal approval by telling her "good" or "good girl". Remember, the cessation of pressure is what tells her she did what we want, so just like we expect an immediate response from her when we ask for movement, so we absolutely must give an immediate response when she does what we wanted. This is an exercise in accountability, where ours is even more important than hers.

Once he's moved and you've released the pressure, you can then invite him back into your space. This is important, for as much as we want to have a sensitive pig that moves when we ask, we also want a relaxed pig. If all we do is move-move-move they can become overly sensitive and jumpy. We want to make very clear distinctions between now we're moving, and now we're not. We do this by inviting that pig back to our space for a quick rub or scratch after the moving exercises, then walk off and go about our normal business. You don't have to invite them in with every single move, but you do need to do it often. We constantly strive to find the balance between sensitizing them (moving) and desensitizing them (inviting them back to us for a rub). Those are two sides of the same well-rounded pig.

We lather, rinse and repeat this maneuver several times a day specifically to teach them that any time and any place we ask them to move, they need to do it. How often depends on the pig. In the beginning, we want to repeat it enough that it becomes automatic, the pig moves when we ask, then calmly comes back to us when we're finished with the exercise. A very light, responsive, naturally submissive pig won't need nearly as much as a pushy, dominant pig, or a pig that has already established unwanted behaviors that need to change.

As we advance in teaching this maneuver we will add another step or two, then another. Just like any behavior we teach, there's a learning curve, not just for the pig, but for the human as well. With practice we can learn to vary our speed, direction, and intensity. We will also refine the signals we give. While we start out with exaggerated step/voice/clap/cluck, in time we shift the cues to be lighter and more subtle. Eventually, we can simply walk into his space and he will move respectfully and easily out of our path. ~ by Lydia Weaver