

Loose Leash Walking

By Brenda Howard

If your dog PULLS HARD on the leash when you are out for a walk, it's time to make some changes! The act of a dog walking by your side is called "heeling" in formal obedience. We don't need or expect our companion dogs to formally heel all the time, but a dog that isn't choking itself or pulling you is way more fun to walk with.

Teaching your dog to walk nicely with you doesn't require a magic wand or a special pill, but some very, very tasty food. The food to choose should be something your dog doesn't eat normally. Boiled liver diced small, cut up hot dogs (warning – hot dogs are very slippery and hard to hang on to!), small pieces of cheese, chicken or even steak can work nicely. Work with your dog before you feed him a meal so he will be hungry.

Place your dog in a collar – the best choice is one he can't back out of – and attach a six-foot leash. Do not try to use a retractable leash because you will have too much bulk in your hand and not enough control. You will be holding the dog's leash and some tasty tidbits. A fanny pack, carpenter's nail pouch, or a "treat training bag" will make this job much easier – unless you prefer to use your pants pockets as treat holders.

Your dog should walk on your left side. The only dog that routinely walks on the right side of its' human handler is Reveille, the Texas A&M mascot, and it's a mystery why that is (notice the restraint used to avoid an Aggie joke here!). If you place your dog on your left he will be protected from on coming traffic if you are walking on the correct side of the road – i.e. against the traffic. Does anyone remember that we are supposed to walk against traffic? But I digress...

You will begin with your dog at your left side. Your goal is to have the dog walk on a loose leash. There should be slack in the leash. You will achieve this by encouraging your dog to "stay with me." There is no need to use the term "heel" as it means nothing to your dog. Our goal is not to achieve a performance level of heeling obedience, but rather the ability to walk your dog with out adding inches to your arm length.

With your dog at your side, roll some of the excess of the leash into your right hand. Leave some slack in the leash. Hold a tasty morsel of food in your left hand. Show your dog the food. Hold the food to your left side so that the dog understands this is where the "goods" are. Take a few steps forward and say "good dog!" and give your dog a taste of the treat. Keep your dog's interest in staying by your side with the food. If your dog pulls ahead of you, take a few steps backward, calling him into you, holding the food at your knees. Release the treat when your dog is directly in front of you and say "good dog!" Move forward again for several steps and treat your dog. ONLY give your dog the food when he is walking nicely (and not pulling) by your side. Slowly add more and more forward steps to the process until you are – tadah – walking!

The food treats are your "magnet" for keeping your dog near you.

Will you need the food treats forever? No, but you will need them for quite sometime and then sporadically for a very long time. You are teaching your dog that good things happen when he is near you. You are giving your dog a paycheck for good behavior. Don't we all like getting paid for our good work?!

There is no need to punish or correct your dog during this training. You are going to be reinforcing the good behavior of your dog staying with you. Give up any bad habits of jerking back on the leash, yelling "no" (or any expletives!) as these methods do not teach the positive behavior you want to mold.

Practice loose leash walking when you are in a good mood. Be patient with your dog. Remember that this should be FUN. A dog that will stay next to you is going to be more engaged with you and more of a joy to walk. And yes, a dog of ANY age can be taught to walk on a loose leash!

Brenda Howard has been training dogs for over 20 years and is a member of The Association of Pet Dog Trainers, The American Bloodhound Club, The Basset Hound Club of America and The Pet Care Services Association (formerly the ABKA).

The information presented here is not intended to substitute for the advice and care of a veterinarian. Please consult your veterinarian regarding all issues relating to your dog's health.

