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Your Smart Dog

Who's Walking Whom? Leash Walking Made Easy

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If you don't have a fenced yard, you're walking the dog at least three times a day, probably more. Do you look forward to those walks or do you dread them? If your dog hasn't mastered the skill of loose leash walking, you probably dread them. Many people teach their dogs to sit and lie down, but don't teach their dog how to walk politely, instead they just hang on for dear life. This month's newsletter provides you the information you need to teach your dog how to walk politely, as well as offer tips on what training equipment can speed up the process for you and your dog.

A Safety Tool

First, it's important to realize that in a good dog – human relationship, the leash is there just for safety. It's to keep your dog from bolting in front of a truck if he's startled. If the relationship is solid, and the training is thorough, then the leash shouldn't be necessary to keep your dog from running away, but used rather as a safety net. If your dog is straining at the end of the leash, unaware that there is anyone at the other end, you need to become a more

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important part of your dog's life. You need to employ basic leadership skills.

Benevolent Leadership

I coach my clients to become benevolent leaders to their dogs: Ask your dog sit while you put the collar and leash on. If the dog gets up before you're done, ask him to sit (once!) and wait for him to comply. If he doesn't sit again, he doesn't get his collar and leash put on. Simple as that. Silently walk away from your dog. Stay away for 30 seconds, come back and try again. Pretty soon, your dog will learn that a smidge of self-control gets the collar and leash on – the first step to getting outside for that walk!

Now that the collar and leash are on, have your dog sit at the closed door. Ask once (just once) for another sit. If your dog doesn't sit, drop the leash and walk away. Come back in 30 seconds and ask for the sit again. If your dog sits, reward your dog by opening the door and starting the walk. *Important Note: If your dog hasn't had a bathroom break and needs to get outside, don't work on this until **after** he's had that break!*

Teaching Loose Leash Walking

Until now, pulling you has worked – it's gotten your dog where he needed to go. He *learned* that pulling was the way to do things. You probably didn't mean to teach him that, but somehow that's what he learned. It's important to realize that if your dog has been pulling on the leash for some time, it will take time for him to learn how to walk politely. After all, until now pulling has worked!

If you read last month's newsletter, you know that management speeds up training. Loose leash walking is no different. We'll use both training and management to help your dog learn to walk politely.



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Training

Consistency

The training part of this exercise is quite simple. A note: consistency is the most important part of this training. And consistency is the sole responsibility of the *human!* No matter how hard it's raining, how little time you have, how much your dog wants to greet a neighbor – pulling can never result in forward progress any more. If *sometimes* your dog gets to go where he wants when he pulls, he's going to try it every time. Why shouldn't he – it sometimes gets him what he wants.

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Tight leash = STOP

Starting now, when you walk your dog, a tight leash means all forward progress stops. You stop dead in your tracks and do not move an inch. I've found that it's easiest to watch the leash, not the dog, to determine when to stop. If there is a straight line from your hand to the dog's collar, the leash is tight – STOP; if there's even a tiny bit of slack in the leash, keep moving forward.

If you've stopped because the leash is tight, stay silent, hold completely still, and wait. Your dog may pull harder, dig at the ground, or whine. Just stay where you are and wait. Silently. Before long, your dog will look at you as if to say "What's your problem, can't you see I want to go *this way!*!" When your dog turns his head to look at you, chances are the leash will slacken. The instant that leash gets a slight dip in it, mark that behavior (click your clicker) and move forward! Be prepared to stop again quickly if the dog dashes ahead and the leash is tight again.

Your dog will quickly realize just how much better it is to be next to you instead of way out in front, leaning into his collar.

Loose leash = GO

When the leash is slack, *reinforce this by rewarding your dog.* Carry a clicker and treats on your walk and click (and reward) your dog often when the leash is slack. This means you'll be clicking and offering food *very often*, maybe every step! The key to success is to reward the dog very often, especially in the beginning. Pulling has worked for him for quite some time, it's our job to show him how much more rewarding it is to walk on a slack leash. For maximum effect, click and reward A LOT! Another side benefit to frequent rewards is that your dog will be by your side more often than he's out in front pulling. Why? Because you'll be offering him tiny, tasty tidbits of food. The more you click the slack leash, the more your dog will walk on a slack leash because you'll be reinforcing it with the food. Your dog will quickly realize just how much better it is to be next to you instead of way out in front, leaning into his collar.

Treat Tips

Because the environment is both a big distraction and a big reward to your dog, your food rewards will have to be extra good in order for your dog to pay any attention to them. Save left over chicken, beef, or fish and chop it up into tiny pieces. Put these pieces in a treat bag and attach it to your belt loop before you head out for a walk with your dog. Don't try to use your dog's kibble to reinforce loose leash walking – he gets that every night in his food dish, it's not nearly exciting enough to be relevant in an outdoor, stimulating environment. It's like offering me steamed cauliflower in an ice cream shop – it's just not good enough!

Management Solutions

The key to teaching your dog leash manners is consistency. If *sometimes* you let your dog pull you over to his favorite fire hydrant or to see his favorite neighbor, he'll *always* try to pull because pulling



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sometimes works. It's hard to be consistent, especially when you have limited time, if the weather's bad (in the rain, the blistering heat, or driving snow, for instance), or if you just want to go for a nice, relaxing walk and don't want to worry about training all the time. So what's a good dog-parent to do? Thankfully, there are lots of gentle, dog-friendly products on the market these days that specifically help to reduce pulling.

You may well be aware of choke and prong (sometimes called pinch) collars. I don't consider either of them to be dog-friendly as they operate on pain (or making the dog uncomfortable) to get the dog to behave. They do work in some cases, but at a cost to the dog – a cost I'm unwilling to ask my dog to pay, particularly since there are better options available to us.

Easy Walk Harness

This is my go-to choice for dogs who pull. This isn't your typical harness – it's designed specifically to reduce pulling. Instead of fastening the leash in the middle of the back, the leash attaches to the front of the harness, across the chest of the dog. Like all the equipment listed here, the Easy Walk Harness doesn't teach the dog not to pull, but it prevents the dog from practicing pulling (and thereby prevents the dog from getting better at pulling).

Gentle Leader Head Collar

This is a great choice for those dogs who are aggressive *and* who pull. (I have one of those dogs myself.) This is another product that doesn't teach the dog not to pull, but doesn't allow the dog to be successful when he pulls. This head collar fits over the head, unlike the harness which fits around the body. This product is very effective – it really works! The downside to this collar is some dogs find it annoying and spend most of the walk trying to get the thing off their head! A proper introduction to the head collar can alleviate these reactions, but that does take time to do.

Be aware that not all harnesses and head collars are created equally. There are no-pull harnesses out there that pinch your dog when he pulls – I do not advocate the use of those harnesses, obviously. Know what you're buying – your dog's comfort and safety depend on it (and on you).

A Final Note

Teaching your dog to walk politely can open up a lot of doors for your dog; you're more likely to take him with you when you head out the door. Exercise is good for both you and your dog, and so is spending time together. It's up to you to teach your dog this new habit – now you know how to do it and what tools will best help you. There's plenty of summertime left to enjoy with your dog – get out there and start practicing!

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Helping good dogs become great dogs.

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