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Clicker Training

Loose-Leash Walking

By Mary Woodward

Daily walks are one of the best things you can do for your dog. Most breeds were bred to work, and lack of exercise leads to boredom and pent-up energy, which leads to destructive behavior around the house. Playing in a yard is great for a dog, but a steady 15-20 minute walk several times a day can do wonders! But when walking your dog is a struggle for you, it's hard to want to spend the time doing it. Luckily, you can teach your dog to walk nicely at your side. If you have a young pup, you can start out teaching loose-leash walking right away. If you have an older dog, who has already learned to pull, then I suggest getting a halter or front clip harness. These tools can make a huge difference. Using them may be all you need to do, or they can help you on those walks while you also work on teaching your dog to walk nicely, with the hope of not needing any extra equipment at all someday.

For most pulling dogs, I recommend that owners try the front clip harness first (the Easy Walk harness by Premier is one brand). On these harnesses, the leash clips to a D ring on the dog's chest (instead of on his back). When the dog starts to pull, his own force turns his shoulders back toward you. The vast majority of dogs acclimate to wearing them immediately, which is why they are usually my first choice. However, if the harness isn't enough, or if your dog has aggression issues, then I recommend a halter, which fits on the dog's head (just like a horse's halter). The leash then clips to a ring under the dog's chin. Halters give you the most control, but most dogs will need to be given time to get used to the feel of something on their faces. The Gentle Leader and Halti are popular brands, but the newer Comfort Trainer has been better tolerated by the dogs on which I've tried it.



Clicker time training tip

Timing is everything when using a clicker and you need to be on the spot when your pet performs the desired trick or command. Keep your timing skills on the click with a simple and effective training technique that you can practice. One trick to keep your click accurate is to toss coins into a container and click as soon as the coin hits the bottom. Practice this in an area away from your pet so no confusion occurs with the clicker.

Teaching the Dog to Walk Nicely

Before starting out, please realise that every step you have let your dog pull you in the past, you were actually teaching him that pulling works. So, if that has been going on for quite a while, prepare to spend a bit of time teaching your dog to walk without pulling! Also understand that to successfully re-train him not to pull, you can't train some of the time and let him pull the rest of the time. You HAVE to make the commitment to only train the behavior you prefer! You will also need to get used to having your dog walk at your side (which is a nice pack thing to do, anyway). It will be far harder for him to learn to be in front, yet not pull. Of course, you want your dog to enjoy his walks! When I walk my dog, she walks nicely next to me as we go briskly around the neighborhood. I know where her favorite sniffing spots are, so when we get to them I let her go over and sniff to her heart's delight. As long as she doesn't try to drag me over!

Ready to start? Get yourself ready - have a whole bunch of tiny treats (or one really big treat he can nibble) and a good leash. I recommend a short one (4 - 6') that is comfortable to hold. Have the treats in the hand *next to the dog*. Hold the leash in your other hand, gathered up so that there is just a bit of slack. It is very important that it not be tight.

Okay, now start out with your dog sitting or standing at your side (use a treat to lure him around to that position if needed). Let him see the treats you are holding in your hand. Say his name once to get his attention, then step off, praising happily. Take JUST 1-2 steps, then pause in mid stride to deliver a treat. (We no longer have people use the clicker for this in class - it was difficult for many people to coordinate everything, and we found that the dogs picked this up very easily without the clicker. If you are coordinated enough to use the clicker, however, then it will speed up the training).



Wait just long enough for him to gobble down the treat, then take 2 more steps and give another treat. Be sure that you are getting the treat to the dog quickly, so that he is still by your side when he gets it. If he runs out in front, then lure him back to your side before giving him the treat. CAUTION!! Don't go more than 2 steps for now! You must hold your dog's attention for this to work and that is so much easier for only 2 steps. Be sure to praise enthusiastically the entire time he's at your side, too. If you need to turn around, then lure your dog around by holding a treat right in front of his nose, make the turn, pause to give the treat, then move on. However, be careful to only use the luring on the about turns and when you have to go past any distractions your dog isn't ready for. Otherwise, when you are walking you must keep the treats away from the dog's nose. He should NOT be walking along, simply staring at a treat you are dangling (or worse, trying to jump up and grab it). So, when you are moving forward, a few steps at a time, keep your treat hand up and across your waist.

If at any point he runs ahead, then lure him back before stepping off again. If this is happening often, then you need to take fewer steps before delivering a treat. Also try to walk quickly and praise - both of those things will go a long way towards keeping your dog's focus on you.

If you have a very small dog or puppy, you might find it gets old bending down to deliver the treats. You can try using a long wooden spoon dipped in peanut butter or soft cheese. You just hold it up and out of the way while walking, then dip it down so your dog just has to reach up a bit for a quick lick before you continue on.

When your dog is consistently walking nicely for 2 steps, then begin requiring more. 4 steps, then 6 steps, etc., before you pause to treat. Keep it fun - make a lot of turns and circles.

It is essential that you use good enough treats, work in a distraction-free area at first, and that you praise the WHOLE time you are pleased with your dog's behavior. You cannot praise enough! Usually a happy, high-pitched voice works well. Try to sound a little silly! If you become quiet, you are likely to lose your dog's attention. You are competing against the entire environment for his attention, so you had better be pretty darn interesting! It is far, far easier to capture his attention before you start out and keep it than to try to capture it back again and again.

Although for a while you will be going through a ton of treats on your walks, eventually you won't need so many, or even any at all. And although I usually recommend soft treats for training, for long exercise walks I find that crunchy treats are great and are much nicer to have in my pockets. Just make sure they are high enough value to hold your dog's attention.

Troubleshooting - is your dog basically staying at your side but jumping up as he walks? Just ignore that at first - consider it sloppy walking that is good enough for now. As you get your coordination down you will be able to start walking at a much brisker pace, which usually eliminates the jumping. If it doesn't, however, once the dog is consistently walking at your side (albeit jumping while doing it), you can begin shaping his behavior by no longer stopping to treat when he is doing the jumping thing. To get a treat, he will need to take at least a couple of steps without jumping.

When you are up to 10 steps or so, it is time to start being variable! From now on, don't just go more and more steps before treating or your dog is likely to lose interest. Instead, work on greater distances variably, throwing in some really short walks now and then (e.g. Go 10 steps, treat, then 12, then 8, then 15, then perhaps just 3. Then 13, 18, 20, 24, 19, 4, 23, 25, etc. Of course, you are still praising the entire time you are moving and then pausing to treat).

Eventually you will be ready to work around distractions, although don't rush this! You want your dog to be successful - keep it easy for him. When you are ready, start out with very mild distractions (other people across the street or watching, etc.) and work slowly up to better ones (other dogs around, first far away then closer). Whenever you work in a new place or with a new distraction, be prepared to use really high-potency treats and to go back to just a couple of steps at a time as a warm up.

The Automatic Sit - would you like your dog to sit nicely, in heel position, whenever you stop, without even being asked? That is the Automatic Sit. To teach this (I would wait until you are up to at least 8 steps or so) simply take a couple of slower, smaller steps before you stop, and as you take the last steps use a treat in your hand to lure him up into a sit. Give a treat. No verbal cue is needed. When he is starting to sit promptly for his treat, then test it - slow down into a stop and wait.... If he does sit (he may need to think about it for a few moments - be patient!) then treat, giving a jackpot! If he doesn't sit, then continue walking for a few steps and try again. If that happens several times in a row, perhaps you need to continue luring him on the sit a few more times to help him know what is expected. Don't worry if the sits aren't perfectly straight at first - you can shape them into being more precise later if you like. When you do stop, be sure to stand up straight and bring both feet together. This will help your dog to distinguish a true "halt" (when he should

sit) from a pause for a treat (when you are in mid stride and likely leaning over a little bit). Be careful not to rely on the lure very long for the sit (or anything else, for that matter) or you will be stuck with it. You also want to be sure to continue to treat actual walking as well as when you stop and he sits.

If your dog acts aggressive towards other dogs when on the leash, I recommend you use the head halter for him and work very hard on teaching attention while walking at your side. If he lunges forward, barking at another dog, you should use a very high value treat to lure him back to you, then continue walking, giving treats continuously until you are past the distraction. The key here is to keep a little bit of slack in the leash. If you keep the leash tight, you are sending a message right down that leash to the dog that you are upset as well, and this will only rile him up more.

Lastly, what about extendable leashes? They can be very useful if you and your dog are just wandering around a yard for a potty break, or if you are walking in a large open area with a well-trained dog and want to give him some more freedom. They are NOT appropriate in areas where there are other dogs or people - it's too easy for someone to get tangled in them.

Now get out there and WALK THAT DOG!

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