

Walking the dog

Train your pet to walk, not pull you

(April 2007) - Hooray for Spring! It's dog walking season again. I tend to want to hibernate in the winter rather than hit the streets, so my dog, Danny Boy, isn't the only one out of shape. Danny Boy LOVES to go on a walk, so we are both glad it's finally warming up.

With the warmer weather, more folks are out walking their dogs and a common complaint I hear about is leash pulling. I know of people who have been pulled off their feet, through the mud, into walls, trees, and down the sidewalk. Not only is it annoying, sometimes it can be hazardous to your health! At the very least, it's no fun to walk down the sidewalk with your dog lunging and pulling every step of the way.

One tool I have found to be effective in controlling this problem is the Gentle Leader head halter. Just like its name implies, the Gentle Leader puts YOU back in charge of the walk, without hurting the dog. Collars don't work, nor do choke collars, because the dog still pulls. It just develops a higher tolerance to pain. Chest harnesses aren't the best solution for a dog that leash pulls either. Dogs have more strength from their chests than their throats, so a chest harness just allows them to pull harder with no pain consequence. The Gentle Leader is not a muzzle and does not restrict the dog's ability to use its mouth. It works more like a halter does on a horse, giving you control over the nose, and where the nose goes, the body will follow.

Another way to make your dog walking experience more pleasant, is to teach her some basic "traffic words." It's easier than you might think to teach a dog vocabulary. You just have to do it through repetition, repetition, repetition. For instance, each time you come to the end of a sidewalk, you and your dog should come to a complete stop and each time you say, "STOP." "Good Stop." You can then reward him in some way, either with a stroke on the head, a meat treat, or simply the pleased tone in your voice. When you physically stop and say the word each time you come to an intersection, your dog begins to associate the reward, and the behavior, with the word. As you begin to proceed across the street you can use the command, "Come," or "Heel."

After this behavior is instilled over time, you may even be able to use the "invisible" leash of your voice. Initially, of course, practice all behavior and vocabulary training ON leash, so you have instant control over your dog. Furthermore, never let your dog off leash on a walk if you are not 100 percent sure you can control them in any situation.

Some traffic words that Danny Boy knows are "Stop," "Wait," "Sit," "Slow," "Heel," and "OK." Nothing perks those ears up more than, "You wanna go for a walk?" except maybe, "You hungry?" Since Danny has four legs and I only have two, he is usually trotting a few feet ahead of me. However, when he reaches the end of the sidewalk, he will stop and wait for me to catch up.

All dogs are capable of learning human language, and interestingly, dogs can learn ANY language. I think it is amazing that we can communicate with another species in this way, and you should take full advantage of your dog's capacity for learning. Now, if I could just teach Danny to shut the door..

If leash pulling is a problem for you and your dog, I highly recommend the use of a head halter and there are several different ones available. In my experience, however, people have the most success with the Gentle Leader head halter. It is available at most large pet retail stores, or can be ordered through your veterinarian's office. If the Gentle Leader is sized and fit properly on the dog and used the correct way, it will put an end to your leash pulling problems.

Your dog will walk like a perfect lady or gentleman beside you, and that's how a walk with your best friend should be.

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