

Leash Training the Adult Dog

Lisa Radosta-Huntley, DVM, and Ilana Reisner, DVM, PhD, Diplomate ACVB, University of Pennsylvania



Walking on a leash without pulling is an essential skill for most pet dogs.

Even dogs with fenced-in yards occasionally go for leash walks and at least go to the veterinarian annually. Many pet owners adopt adult dogs or older juvenile dogs from rescue and humane organizations, and these dogs often lack leash training or may have developed poor habits, including leash biting, pulling, and jumping. This article addresses the concepts and control tools for basic training of adult dogs. Further efforts are indicated in many cases, and may be outlined in future articles.

Leash training adult dogs is based on the same principles as training them to obey the *sit*, *down*, and *stay* exercises. Adult dogs should be started on the leash as if they were puppies with no training. Before starting a training program, it is important to assess the client's goals. Not all dog owners—nor all dogs—have the same objectives and needs, so knowing these in advance will help customize the training efforts.

Reward

To reward a dog for proper behavior, it is important to identify a sufficiently motivating reward. Examples include food, a tennis ball, or a squeaky toy. Although praise from the owner can be paired with a stronger reinforcer (e.g., food) to eventually reduce the need to carry food, praise alone, especially when the dog and owner have no prior relationship and the dog is learning something new, is not a sufficiently enticing reward. Furthermore, while food is a potent reinforcer for most dogs, some will respond only to highly palatable rewards, such as freshly cooked liver or chicken.

Owners may still ask if they always have to carry the reward (e.g., food or toys) with them to maintain their dog's training. It is important to inform owners that unrewarded behaviors will eventually be extinguished (i.e., will no longer be offered). In other words, the owner will have to reinforce good behavior at least on an intermittent schedule or the dog will not continue to offer that behavior.

Collars/Harnesses

Once an effective reward has been found, it is time to choose the correct tool for control (e.g., collar, harness) for that particular dog. Generally speaking, head collars offer the most effective and humane control of dogs on leash. Examples include the Gentle Leader, NewTriX, Snoot Loop, Canny Collar, and Halti. While each is slightly different, they all use the principle of controlling the dog's head in order to control his body. Most dogs can be taught to accept the head collar by use of positive reinforcement and short training sessions. Although individual dogs may seem bothered temporarily, there is no significant difference in the physiologic stress response in dogs wearing a head collar versus those wearing a buckle collar.¹

Head collars may not be indicated or acceptable for every dog. Owners who jog or bike with their dogs in warm weather should avoid their use because they may restrict panting.

For individual dogs that resist the collar, “no-pull” harnesses may be helpful. Such harnesses

continues

include the Easy Walk, Sporn, and SENSE-ible harnesses. Like head collars, these devices work by producing mild discomfort when the dog pulls. Traditional harnesses are generally not recommended for dogs larger than the toy breeds, which do not pull as vigorously as larger dogs. Training a dog with a traditional harness is possible, but it offers more challenges than the other control tools mentioned here.

Training or “choke” collars are generally not recommended for several reasons. First, they are typically used incorrectly by pet owners who lack the skill and timing to use them effectively. Second and more important, poorly fitted choke collars sit at mid-neck and can lead to tracheal



Head collars offer the most effective and humane control of dogs on leash. Shown here is the Gentle Leader.

compression and coughing without inhibiting pulling. In contrast, head collars and “no-pull” harnesses do not require a great deal of skill or exceptional timing. They simply act as “power steering” and are relatively easy, effective tools for the average pet owner.

Leads

The leash that the owner chooses is not nearly as important as the collar, harness, or reward. However, owners who are teaching a dog to walk on a lead without pulling should avoid retractable leads. Although these can be wonderful for trained dogs, they can be counterproductive in novices because, by their design, they encourage and reward pulling. Furthermore, all of the devices listed above tighten with the pressure of a retractable leash, which in effect “corrects” the dog constantly even when he is walking relatively close to the owner: when an

What to Do

- Choose a reward that the *dog* finds rewarding; food is the most common, but a favorite toy can be effective as well.
- Choose the type of humane collar or harness that best suits the client’s goals; avoid choke collars.
- Choose the leash; this is less important than the choice of reward, harness, or collar, but do not use a retractable leash.
- Reward the dog for good behavior *on time, every time*, especially if it was not requested.
- Recommend a clicker if the owner’s timing tends to be off; an “i-click” clicker is especially convenient for walks.

“unlocked” retractable lead is used with a head halter or any of the devices mentioned above, the dog will experience discomfort when in the correct position as well as when pulling. This will confuse the dog and inhibit learning.

Techniques

Once the reward, collar, and leash have been chosen, it is time to get to work. Learning will proceed most quickly with good, motivational training, and an effective, humane, user-friendly control device. There are many specific techniques to leash train a dog using motivation. For example, some techniques involve stopping all forward motion while others involve walking in the opposite direction or in a 90-degree turn each time the dog pulls. It is not recommended to attempt to pull a dog along by the collar. This engages his natural response to pull back against the owner in addition to causing discomfort, which further decreases his motivation to stay with the owner. Instead, the owner should encourage the dog to come into the correct position verbally or with a food reward. The dog is then rewarded as soon as he is in the correct position.

It is important during the early stages of training to avoid inadvertently rewarding the dog when he pulls. When the dog pulls, the owner should stop moving, get the dog’s attention, and *then* reward him (for attending to the owner). In addition, whenever the dog is walking quietly next to the owner or is *not* pulling, he should be rewarded, perhaps by being petted or permitted to play. Well-meaning pet owners frequently forget to reward appropriate behavior.

Positive reinforcement is a critical component of training: It serves to increase the strength of the dog’s response as well as the likelihood that he will continue to be motivated to walk in the correct position. Whenever dogs are told what is “wrong,” they must then be told what is “right” so that they understand what is expected. In other words, whenever the control tool self-corrects (i.e., slows or stops) the dog, the owner must then direct the dog to the correct position and reward him for that correct behavior. Even more important, dogs that independently assume the correct position should be generously rewarded for doing so.

Clicker training can be an effective tool for some owner–dog teams, particularly for owners whose timing of giving “conventional” rewards is off. A clicker allows them to mark the moment of the correct behavior (i.e., walking calmly at the owner’s side) with a “click.” The click is followed by a treat, but it does not have to be delivered at the moment that the dog is in the right position.



Dogs of any age can learn “new tricks.” With a little bit of effort and consistency, dogs can learn to walk on lead without pulling, a skill that will lead to a lifetime of good exercise and quality time for both the dog and his family. ■

See Aids & Resources, back page, for references, contacts, and appendices.