

Walking on Leash
by Terena Thomas

1. Start by first choosing which side you'd like to teach your dog to walk on, right or left, and what KIND of heeling you want: Strict AKC Obedience Heel or Just Don't Tug on the Leash Heel. Once you've narrowed that down, choose a release word that's appropriate for your lifestyle. The first week or two that the dog is learning to heel, do the exercise off leash throughout the house and back yard before progressing to in the front yard or beyond. Until they learn WHERE they're supposed to walk, it's not fair to discipline the pup when he's out of position.

2. Using food lures in the hand on the desired walking side encourages the pooch to stay in position, because great things come to dog's that stay focused on their handler and maintain position. Starting with a frequent treat schedule for staying in position, reward the dog with excited praise AND cookies. When the dog takes 1 step in the proper position, stop and treat the dog before turning away from the dog and walking off. This encourages the dog to be with the owner as well as to watch the owner! "If your little puppy doesn't watch then he can't get any more good stuff from his Mom and Dad!". Do this one-step then treat a few times before asking your pooch to go a few more steps between each treat; remember to continue to verbally praise as you walk to cheer your dog on.

Gradually work up to 15 steps between rewarding the dog, all the while praising. After the dog can go 15 steps, omit the switching of directions after treating/rewarding the dog in order to maintain some continuity and reality to the exercise. It is also at this time that your pup can start being 'weaned' from the cookies slightly. Without changing anything else, put your cookies in the opposite hand, and only reward your dog for staying placed on the correct side. If he follows the cookies, keep walking and ignore him until he figures out that you're not going to give him anything (voice, food, pets) until he's where you've been practicing. When the dog can do about 5 minutes in the house and around the yard while off leash with only a few treats and lots of praise, then the dog is ready to become challenged with the outdoor environment, where distractions abound. He is also ready to remove the cookies from your hands altogether. Put them in your pocket, training bag or fanny pack. You'll still reward him (especially in new or tough environments), just not as frequently.

3. As you practice step 2 (teaching your dog where Heel position is) be sure your dog isn't getting away with dragging you about on your regular walks. Using a Gentle Leader, Halti, Sporn Harness or other no-pull gadgets can be very useful when introduced slowly and fitted properly. DO NOT USE ANY KIND OF DEVICE that may constrict his airflow, cause him pain or elicit fear! This includes choke chains, pinch collars, nylon cinch collars or shock collars. DO USE tools that use your dog's natural instincts to resist for your benefit such as the Gentle Leader or Sporn Harness. Limit your use of a retractable leash as well, as these tools only teach your dog to walk WITH tension on the leash, which is totally counterproductive to what you're teaching your hound. Before going out in public though, where lots of things can be considered reinforcing from a dog's perspective, practice the following four corrective techniques to encourage your dog to stay in the right position. DO NOT use a verbal correction or talk more to your dog for being out of position than for being in the correct position. It's best to stop talking altogether when your pooch isn't where he's supposed to be and follow with one of the four techniques listed below. They can be used exclusively or in combination as long as you reward, pet, praise and treat with more frequency, and energy for the RIGHT position than the measure taken when they're out of place.

Sit and Focus: as soon as the dog is even one step out of position, stop moving and ask your dog to sit. Either a lure is used to gain focus or a gentle, consistent pull upward from the leash is used to get the sit behavior from the distracted dog. Once the sitting position is attained, loosen the leash again, so that the dog is holding himself in the sit position. Once self-control is shown by the dog ask for forward movement again. As soon as the dog is back into position, keep the leash loose and verbally praise before rewarding with cookies.

180 degree direction change: when the dog is even an inch out of position gently, yet effectively turn away from the dog and walk the other way. The key to doing this technique correctly is to use a

flexing motion at the elbow when your dog feels tension on the leash to avoid causing any kind of whiplash. As soon as the dog is back in position, loosen the leash to release any tension. Praise a few steps then give a cookie.

360 degree turn into the dog: (make sure not to knee them or step on their toes). A tiny inward circle into the dog teaches the dog to watch out where their master is. It's critical that you not accidentally hurt the dog during this exercise by stepping on them or hitting them hard with your knees! This can be successfully accomplished (although you'll feel like you have two left feet at first) by first pulling the dog back with the leash and holding them back, so that his neck is even with the thigh before walking in a tight (tight enough to get the dog's hind end to move independently from his front end) circle. When your pup aware of his owner's presence, loosen the leash, walk on and give a lot of praise for proper heel positioning.

Be a tree: Just as the name implies, when your dog pulls out of position, simply stop all movement and plant your feet. Don't let out any leash or move again until your dog looks up at you. At that point, ask your dog to either sit, down or come and reward heavily. Start heeling again by luring your dog into the proper heel position, loosen your leash and reward for one-step of correct heeling. Gradually build back up to 15 steps between cookies.

4. After the dog has been heeling off-leash all around the house and the backyard, try going out to the front yard with the leash securely fastened, and loose when the dog is in position. The dog is heavily lured again one step at a time and rewarded for staying in position. Gradually increase the number of steps you can go between treats until you're back to walking 15 steps between cookies (keep verbally rewarding!) When the dog shows success in the yard, extend the training to the sidewalk and roadways around his home. When he is successful there, take him to the park, the vet's office and other new locations where he may get distracted or revert to his old style of walking. When introducing new locations, lower your expectations, bring lots of cookies and start back at exercise 2 for a short time and gradually build his confidence until he's heeling with you out and about just as he would heel for you in your home.

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