



Maplewood Dog Training

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Leash Walking Made Simple

by Katrin Andberg

The dream of every dog owner is to have a dog that, when the lead is snapped on, walks politely beside them at heel, with a responsive prance in his step, head up, tail wagging, thoroughly enjoying the time he is spending out for a walk with his master in the great outdoors. This dream, alas, often times clashes harshly with the reality of leash walking that occurs in most dog owning households- the lead being clipped on appears to give one's dog an open invitation to forge ahead, pulling with all his might, going where he please and often times dragging said owner along in the process.

Teaching your dog to walk at heel, on a loose leash, is, in actuality, a simple process when one breaks it down into pieces. The crux being that simply because something is simple does not also automatically make it easy. Teaching your dog to walk at heel and respond to your moves and commands when on a walk requires, to start as it does with all dog training, a good amount of consistent effort on your part. Leash walking is all about being able to effectively communicate to your dog what the dream you have of a dog walking beside you at heel all really means.

The three concepts outlined in this article, give you the power to teach any dog, of any age, how to successfully walk at heel on a loose leash. They require no fancy training aids, all you need is a flat buckle collar and a 4 or 6 foot long leather or nylon leash. They require that you plan ahead with your training, that you set up training sessions to make your dog successful, that you are consistent with your goals and expectations, and they require that you genuinely and emphatically tell and reward your dog when he has done the right thing that you want.

Concept 1- Pulling Never Works

The initial basic tenant of leash walking is- **Pulling Never Works**. If one is following this tenant, then it is helpful to remind oneself that the “never” of Pulling Never Works is all encompassing and means quite strictly *never*. Pulling never works means that for your dog, pulling on the lead never gets him what he wants, he is never allowed to go forward if he is pulling, and pulling is never an effective means of getting where he wishes to go.

Now if pulling never works, the question remains of what *does* work? What does earn your dog the privilege of getting where he wants to go and to go forward, is staying beside you in heel position and that brings us to concept two in leash walking- It's All about Position.

Concept 2- It's All About Position

With the way that your dog understands and conceptualizes his world, the concept of “leash” carries very little meaning. Dogs are very literal and concrete thinkers and the concept of a leash, or string attached to his collar, is a very variable criteria. Lengths of leashes change almost constantly based on where you hold it, it’s a very fluxuating concept that can be incredibly difficult for a dog to grasp. **What dogs do have a significantly easier time conceptualizing and understanding is position or where in relation to you he needs to be.** A position is concrete and it is literal, and if it is in relation to you, then your dog has a set criteria for when he can be right and earn a reinforcer. **The most common defined position for heel or leash walking is the dog’s shoulder in line with your leg.**

Now how the concept two, of position, ties in to concept one, pulling never works, is that if your dog is in position then he is not pulling, you, the handler, ensures that the lead is slack, and the dog is allowed to go forward. If the dog is out of position, regardless of if the lead is tight or not, because, again remember, it’s all about position and really very little about the actual lead, your dog is by definition “pulling” and not allowed to go forward.

When teaching concepts one, pulling never works, and two, it’s all about position; it can be very helpful for the handler to understand a learning theory concept called the Premack Principle. The Premack Principle, in essence, states that “To get what you [the dog] wants, you [the dog] must first do what I [the handler] wants.” This means that for a dog who wants to go forward towards destination A, he must first do what the handler wants, which is stay in position. If the dog gets out of position, he loses the opportunity to get what he wants (to go forward to destination A), until he once again does what the handler wants (gets in position), and then he is again allowed to get what he wants (to go to destination A).

A way to make the Premack Principle work when it comes to leash walking, is that if your dog moves out of position, you stop and take a few steps backwards, meaning the dog is taken farther *away* from what he wants. Once the dog moves back into position, he is allowed to go forward for as long as he is able to maintain position. The moment he gets out of position, you once again stop and take him back, further from where he wants to go.

By implementing and being consistent with concepts one and two of leash walking you can quickly teach your dog to maintain heel position no matter what lead you have on his collar, or even if you have no lead at all.

Concept 3- Give to Pressure

As stated above in concept two, a leash itself carries very little meaning for your dog. The greater world to a dog is a place full of enticing smells, sights and sounds. Asking your dog to ignore all of those distractions and pay close attention to where he is in relation to you and the leash is a very tall and complex order. In order to help give the lead itself a bit more meaning to your dog, it can be very beneficial to take the time to teach your dog that it is his job, his responsibility, to purposefully slack the leash any time there is tension or pressure on it. By teaching your dog to actively give to pressure or tension on the lead and to slack it, you give your dog a

concept of what he is to do when on lead and you give your dog an understanding of how he can successfully walk forward on a loose leash.

To teach your dog to give to pressure on the lead, you don't even need to leave the comforts of your home. This exercise can be practiced anywhere and, to start, is best practiced when you are not going for a walk. Take your dog's lead and clip it to his collar. Stand with your dog beside you or slightly ahead of you, and then purposefully put some tension on the lead, making the lead taut. Put enough pressure that your dog is encouraged to shift his weight backwards or take a step back. The moment you feel through the lead that your dog has shifted backwards, slack the leash, praise him profusely and reward him with a treat. As your dog begins to understand that moving backwards when you put pressure on the lead is what you want, you will need to place less and less tension on the lead to elicit the backwards motion response. Soon your dog will actively begin to slack the leash on his own whenever the leash becomes tight in even the slightest way.

When it comes to teaching your dog to walk beside you at heel on a loose lead, it is critical to remember that you are asking your dog to ignore a great multitude of distractions and focus his intentions tightly on you. This can be very mentally tiring for a dog, and it is best to start small. When you begin leash training, it is best to view success not in the distance you are able to walk, but in whether you were able to fully maintain the criteria of pulling never works, it's all about position and give to tension. If you set a goal of "getting around the block," you will easily find yourself discouraged, your dog frustrated and mentally fried, and end up with your dog dragging you on lead to get home. Set a goal instead of, perhaps, getting half way down the driveway and also being able to get fully up the walkway to the door to get inside at the end. It is also a good idea, to plan extra time into your walks, so that you don't find yourself rushing to make an appointment and allowing your dog to pull simply because you are pressed for time. If you set small, attainable goals and work progressively over time, you too can have the dog that everyone dreams of, who walks politely at heel, head up, tail wagging in the breeze, happy to be out spending time with his master in the great outdoors.