

The Walk

All dogs have the instinctive need to walk. Even the most highly bred companion dog still retains the hard wiring of its distant wolf cousin to walk (in the wild it would be to scavenge and hunt). The walk serves not only as an exercise vehicle for your dog (and you!) but more importantly a relationship-building exercise that reinforces your leadership to your dog (ultimately a huge source of comfort for him).

The primary purpose of the walk is for your dog to pay attention to you – to follow wherever it is you go, and at the pace you keep. A calm but purposeful walk is the perfect opportunity for your dog to perform a “job” with which to earn his breakfast. “Jobs” give high-energy dogs an outlet, and fearful dogs confidence. Performing obedience tasks, adhering to its assigned role in the pack, is naturally fulfilling to your dog. It’s what many dogs were bred to do. Which brings us back to the walk.

After you have fulfilled your job as leader, and your dog has fulfilled his job as follower, you can allow your dog to have the reward of the more pleasurable aspects of being a dog, like reading and sending pee-mail, sniffing among the leaves, checking out signposts, etc. Your dog considers this kind of reward as affection from you. Just keep walking while your dog enjoys his off-leash time, and he will continue to follow you.

The All-Business Walk

Depending on your dog’s temperament (dominant vs submissive vs fearful vs aloof) you’ll need to decide the relative position that your dog will take during your walk. Instinct tells a dog “the leader goes first”. A more dominant dog with guarding instincts, for example, should be walked slightly behind you to serve as a constant reminder to this dog that his skills in defense are not required. A more laid-back dog can be walked at your side. Either way, the dog should never be allowed to pull you. Even if you adopt a “loose leash” position, where it’s OK if the dog is slightly in front of you as long as he’s not pulling on the leash, remember to correct any pulling with a quick side collar correction.

Getting Ready

When getting ready to walk your dog, call the dog to you, do not go to the dog to put the collar and lead on. Call him to you and have him sit and “look” (eye contact). Your dog may show submission to the collar by dipping his head, which is fine. When he’s sitting calmly, put on the collar and attach the lead. If he starts to jump or get excited before you’ve gotten on his gear, say “eh eh” and abruptly stand up and remove your attention from the dog. He’ll most likely come back for another try. Repeat process (it may take some time if you’ve got a really

exuberant dog). Use a 6 foot lead; retractable leashes are not recommended because they essentially serve as a reward to the dog for pulling.

Calmly and with no fuss, walk your dog to the front door and open the door. Without speaking, use your body to block the opening, asking your dog to sit and “wait”. Use an open palm to the face gesture for “wait”. Do not allow the dog to bolt out the door. The dog needs to see and accept that you are the one deciding when it's time to leave.

As soon as your dog is sitting quietly at the exit, it's time to leave. Be sure you exit the house - even if it's just a step - before the dog.

Proper Gear Placement

The training collar should sit far up on the neck, giving you more control over the dog. A body harness is not recommended for teaching your dog to walk properly; it's too much of an invitation to pull (think sled dog). However, a head collar, such as a Gentle Leader, can be very effective with dogs that are insistent pullers or jumpers, or for smaller or frail owners who may have trouble keeping up with their larger dogs.

If you choose a neck collar, keeping it and the lead high up on the neck, like the high leash positioning of dogs in the show ring, gives you more control with less effort. There should be no tension in the lead. Do not allow the dog to pull and don't constantly pull on your dog. Always remain calm and relaxed.

The lead should be short and hang loose. If the dog starts to pull off in one direction, either abruptly turn and walk in the opposite direction (with an “eh eh”) or if the dog is exerting less pulling, snap the lead to the side, snapping him out of the distraction and re-focusing his attention on you.

Less is more (talking, that is)

Dogs are not the naturally verbal creatures we are, relying more on their noses than anything else. However, they can certainly recognize tones of voice, e.g. happy voice, angry voice, alpha-male voice. Most of the time, your leadership can and should be demonstrated with body language and few, if any, words. Your dog can read your body language and “feel” your energy. No need to declare “Hey look, Spot! There's another dog. Hopefully we can pass by without any trouble.” Your dog will feel it if this is what's going through your mind. An “eh eh” for a re-focusing correction, and a click or a quiet “good boy” for that's right, now keep walking will usually suffice as verbal conversation with your dog. Anything else can and will be interpreted by your dog in whatever manner he deems appropriate or reflective of your state of mind.

If the dog starts getting excited and you're unable to keep him in the proper position, stop and make the dog sit. Wait until he is calm, than start again. Do not

call to the dog when you start walking again, just start walking. Pack leaders do not call the pack to come with them, the pack instinctively follows.

In the zone

Once you're both "in the zone" where you're keeping a good pace and your dog has his head up and his eyes forward, keep going. Most dogs benefit greatly from just a 30 minute walk per day; owners find it can be a major factor in keeping those bad behaviors at bay.

The dog is not to sniff the ground and relieve themselves where they please, they are to concentrate on following their handler while walking. The person walking the dog decides when the dog is allowed to sniff or pee, not the dog. It is ok to allow your dog to sniff around and do his business, however, only when you decide it is ok. The dog needs to see you are leading him, he is not leading you.

Timing is everything for distractions

By understanding a dog's body language, you are in the position to interrupt any reactions to distractions your dog might be inclined to have. Being surprised by a skateboarder or another dog is enough to send some dogs into a frenzy with underlying motives that are sometimes difficult to identify. Whether your dog reacts aggressively, fearfully, or overly exuberantly, your job as leader and protector is to illustrate that the distraction is no big deal. This might require asking your dog to "look" at you for a treat while the distraction passes, or require that you give a leash correction strong enough to keep the dog on path and task. You may need to calmly stop and have your dog "sit". Again, your body language and demeanor will convey much more information to your dog than a series of verbal commands.

If you pass a barking dog or other distraction, keep moving forward. If your dog averts its attention to the distraction, give a tug on the lead to avert the attention back to the walk at hand. If the tug does not work you can also use your foot, not to kick the dog, but to touch him on a rear flank just enough to snap his attention back on you. If you find the dog pulling, stop and make the dog sit. Correct any excited behavior over the distraction, with a tug and or an assertive touch to the neck using your hand as a claw, as soon as you see the dog starting to avert his gaze toward the distraction, or as soon as you see a look in your dog's eyes that tells you he is going to begin barking or growling. Timing is everything. This must be done right before the behavior happens or at the exact moment it starts. You do not want to wait until it escalates. If you wait too long before correcting a dog (we're talking seconds), the dog may not even hear you, as he will be too focused on the distraction. When correcting your dog, match your dog's intensity, keeping in mind the difference between assertive and angry.

Jobs on the walk

Meet and greet

I like to have my dog sit when I stop at crosswalks, doorways, and certainly at the threshold of the car door. When I come upon someone I know, it is my job as leader and protector to “manage” the greeting and interaction, particularly if another dog is involved. Tell your dog “I’m in charge; this is my job” by having your dog sit slightly behind your leg while you have a few moments of conversation with the other person, ignoring the dog(s). Use the “wait” hand signal to let the dog know to pause. Your dog may choose to lie down.

If all dogs present are calm, you can introduce the dogs by positioning them tail-to-nose and keeping the leashes from tangling by walking in a circle, allowing the dogs to sniff each other’s rear. If any of the dogs become excited, simply step back and have your dog sit.

To a dog, a head-on greeting is the most confrontational. Don’t allow your dog to pull you toward another person or animal. Don’t introduce your dog to a dog that is out of control, either behaving aggressively or just overly excited. Oftentimes dogs feel the need to “correct” this kind of excited behavior, which can result in a fight.

If someone wishes to pet your dog and you feel you are in control of the dog, ask him to sit quietly and instruct people to allow your dog to sniff their hand and to pet him below the chin (an on-top-of-the-head pat may be OK for a more dominant dog that isn’t hand shy).

Baggage Handler

Putting a doggy back pack on a dog is another example of giving your dog a “job”. This is a good idea for some of the more active breeds, who have higher energy levels and exercise requirements. Weight the bag with a couple water bottles. The dog will get a better workout, and it will also slow him down a bit, making it easier to walk.

Like brushing your teeth

Walking your dog should be as much a part of your day as any other health-sustaining ritual or habit. If you are going off to work for the day, walk your dog before you leave the house. This will put the dog into a rest mode for the time you are gone. Dogs should also be walked before they eat, fulfilling the dog’s instinct to work for food.