

What a Drag

It's spring and what better time to get out for long enjoyable walks with your bestfriend to see the flowers in bloom and smell the roses. Only one problem – your dog pulls, and instead of walking the dog, the dog is walking you right into the rose bushes!

Is it possible to stop and smell the roses without getting dragged into them? Of course it is. Learn why your dog pulls and you have a good chance of training your friend to walk with you on a loose leash. Soon you will be having a pleasant time together.

- *“Don't bother me, I'm busy.”*

The minute you step outside for a walk, you have opened a “Pandora's box” of tantalizing sights, smells and sounds that send your dog into a state of utter frenzy. I have yet to meet the untrained dog that has the attention and focus required to stay beside his owner without pulling – so be relieved that we all experience similar behaviors in the beginning.

Lack of attention and focus, however, does not mean your dog is intentionally being obstinate, unruly or misbehaved. It means your dog is compelled by the things that distract him and has not yet learned to walk and deal with distractions at the same time. It's the equivalent of a human learning to walk, chew gum and carry on a conversation all at once. Distractions lead your dog to pull in whatever direction is most interesting. This issue becomes especially problematic with a dog that is large and strong – and has an instinct to run, chase or pull.

Distractions will always be there, but I can recommend several different ways to change and correct this behavior, making you a good “dog handler.”

- *Help your dog “habituate” or get used to its leash.*

Some puppies, and even older dogs, enjoy the game of carrying their leash around or playing with it while walking. Put a leash on in the house and allow the dog to have it on randomly. This will make the leash far less important. Once the dog habituates to the leash and has learned to ignore it, you can move on to the next step.

Start by picking up the leash in the house and walking with your dog from room to room. Ask the dog to watch you as you walk slowly at first with either a treat or a favorite toy in your other hand. By starting inside you are



obviously removing the outdoor distractions, but you are also creating a sense of fun and importance for yourself in the mind of your dog.

- *Make your dog think you are keenly interesting.*

Call the dog and give a gentle tug on the leash every time its attention veers away from you. Use some high-pitched “happy talk” (“C'mon let's go, let's go!”), make sounds and squeak the toy, or wave the treat to get and keep its attention.

While dogs are convincingly intelligent, they are not complex (in the way that humans are) and they will always go to the thing they view as the most fun. If you appear to your dog as keenly interesting, you have a better bet of getting it to stick around on as well as off leash.

- *Be unpredictable.*

You are now walking your dog around the house on leash and it is enjoying this game because it's fun. When you think you're ready, ask your dog to sit, look at you and give it a treat. Now start moving in more unpredictable ways; take a right turn, a left turn, about face and then ask for a sit. If your dog follows you and looks right at you when you ask for a “sit” deliver a treat and lavish praise. If your dog does this well ten times in the house, you are now ready to go outside.

- *Time to venture out.*

If you have one, start in the backyard. If not, go to a small park during “off” hours. Follow the same steps that you did in the house. Maintain a very happy and animated disposition – it is best not to try this if you are feeling impatient or have too many other distractions of your own. Give this exercise all of your attention.

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Remember, you are now introducing the outdoors, and if your backyard is anything like mine you have squirrels, birds, sounds from the street, airplanes and a host of other distractions to deal with. Try this on a number of different occasions at different times of the day and at night. You may not be aware, but different times mean noticeably different distractions for your dog. The daytime may provide more hungry squirrels shopping around for food – the nighttime means dinner cooking smells from your neighbors' houses. After you've had success on 10 different occasions, you are ready to venture for a real stroll – outside the house in the neighborhood.

- Use ploys, decoys and high-value treats.

Before you leave the house you must first identify a couple of things that can be used to get your dog's attention when you're out for a walk. Some dogs are more food motivated than others so for those dogs take along a "high-value" food treat. A high-value treat would be something like cheese (string cheese works well), or leftovers from last night's dinner cut up in very small bits – a little goes a very long way. Some dogs are crazy about toys or balls so take along one or two of those "decoys" on your next walk and pull it out as soon as you lose your dog's attention.

Some dogs are most motivated by praise and attention from their handler. Many people are embarrassed to use "happy talk" with their dog out in public. Don't be. Communication and using "ploys" like happy talk are the keys to getting and keeping your dog's attention when it is most distracted. While toys and treats will help, you must be animated and communicative (at least initially) with your dog when you're training him or her to walk on leash. Otherwise, you'll lose her attention and she'll look around for other things, resulting in pulling.

It's helpful to tell your dog when he or she is doing a good job on a walk. Ask for a "sit" and deliver one of your high-value treats, ploys of praise or affection, or a friendly chomp on the squeakie toy decoy – then proceed with your walk.

- "Heel" or "side."

As for verbal communication, only when your dog is consistently walking alongside you on a "loose leash" can you call this behavior "heel" or "side". Constantly saying a word before your dog is demonstrating a behavior is not going to make sense to him.

When the dog pulls, you have the option to say "uh, uh", in a voice that is low and imposing, giving the leash a little tug at the same time. When he stops pulling, go back to your "happy talk."

You also have the option to stop or turn when on a walk to correct the problem mid-stream. To most dogs, the movement of the walk itself is the reward, so stopping, in effect is a mild punishment. Dogs want to keep going and if you stop, along with rewarding the right behavior, chances are good that the dog will start to get the point. Also, when you turn, the pulling is immediately checked or corrected. Your dog is again walking by your side – he's more anticipatory about your movement and, therefore, more attentive to you.

By now you should have created a situation where the dog is paying attention to you for many different reasons. If the pulling behavior has been going on for a while without correction that means the behavior is more ingrained. It will take a while, as it always does, to change a behavior – especially one that is both instinctive and learned.

- *Get a jump on the competition.*

Another helpful thing to do is identify the competition while you are on a walk and be pre-emptive whenever you can with a ploy, decoy or treat. What are the specific “distractions” that are most apt to get or pull your dog’s attention away from you on a walk?

My one year-old mixed breed cattle dog is a very social animal and is most interested by dogs and people (especially children) walking toward us. As soon as I anticipate this type of distraction, I pull out a toy or treat and call her name. Some dogs, like mine, just want to greet everyone, see what’s going on and pull toward those things.

Other dogs, probably due to under-socializing, are the opposite—scared and hyper-vigilant when outside and wanting to pull away from the things they fear. In either case, you must de-sensitize your dog to the things that excite or frighten it—especially on a walk. Again, this method takes time and patience and you would probably benefit with the help of a professional dog trainer.

For those of you who do not have the time or patience, there are different types of training collars or leads that prevent the dog from pulling. I am in favor of using such tools and often recommend a gentle lead, a Martindale collar, a harness that latches in the front, and other training collars.

Choke collars are not recommended because that’s exactly what they do—choke and compress the windpipe and potentially cause serious damage.

The gentle lead, much like a bridle on a horse, prevents the dog from going too quickly since any pull will force it to turn its head, slow down and walk at your pace in order for it to see where it’s going. The down side of the gentle lead is that some dogs do not like it and will try to get the lead off with its paws.

People also mistake the gentle lead for a muzzle, so some dog owners don’t want to use it because they think others will stigmatize their dog. The front-latching harness operates on the same principle as the gentle lead, but the results are not as quick or dramatic.

Training collars are useful and discourage dogs from pulling. The bad news is that the dog is not really “learning not to pull” —the tool is simply preventing the pulling. My best recommendation is to use one of the training collars coupled with the methods described above.

- *Put the power in your hands—get into leather!*

Here’s the final, but most important, thing about tools—get yourself a good, solid leather leash. Unlike your nylon or fabric type of leash, a leather leash has no pull or stretch and puts the power in your hands. If you do give your dog a tug or a pull, you want that action to have meaning.

Leather also saves wear and tear on your hands and arms. It does not have to be fancy or expensive. A simple ¾ inch thick, 4- or 6-foot leash will do the trick. You can find them for around \$20.

To stop your dog from pulling, be patient with yourself and your dog. If you find that you’re getting frustrated, end the walk and start again later. Do it in short segments of time—5 to 10 minutes initially. Don’t lose hope. You can go on a pleasant walk with your dog—it will just take a little time, a little more patience and the desire to have a steadfast, safe and reliable walking companion.

Until then, stay away from the roses. 🐾