

Pulling on the Lead



Whether teaching a puppy for the first time, or retraining an adult dog, the approach to lead training is basically the same.

Equipment:

Metal "choke" collars should be avoided, and should certainly never, ever be used on puppies. These collars work on the principle of negative reinforcement (but only if used correctly, with spot-on precision timing) or punishment (the result of poor timing) which is counterproductive. Modern training methods emphasize reward-based training. The best equipment is a broad snugly fitting leather or webbing collar which buckles round the dog's neck and a leather or webbing lead around 4' in length.

Technique:

With the dog on your left, hold the lead at a comfortable length in your left hand, and a toy or titbit in your right. Walk forward, encouraging the dog to stay close to you, using the titbit or toy to try to keep his attention. Reward with the titbit or a game as soon as he is in the correct position.

If the dog forges forwards as soon as you move off, stand still. Do not pull on the lead, but encourage the dog to come back to your side. Say "heel" and reward as he does so. Only move forwards when the dog is close beside you.

Don't be tempted to try to cover too much distance to start with; in the early stages as little as one or two paces is enough, breaking off frequently to reward and play, gradually increasing the distance as the dog learns.

Don't be predictable - if you walk forwards in a straight line the dog will soon start to anticipate and pull ahead. Change direction by turning through 90 or 180 degrees to the right, rewarding your dog's efforts to stay with you.

Left hand turns (turning into the dog) are too advanced for early stage training, but left handed circles, getting gradually smaller and then larger again, are excellent for bringing the dog to heel and keeping him there. Always break off to reward when he is doing well.

Short daily training sessions based on this technique should result in a dog that walks happily to heel without pulling, especially if practiced from an early age. However, problems can develop for a variety of reasons, and depending on the cause, may require additional action to overcome.

Problems and Solutions

It is important to remember that it takes two to pull! The emphasis must always be on trying to maintain a slack lead, and to be in a position to avoid a pulling situation, enabling the dog to learn by use of reward.

1. Dog pulls hard on the lead, especially when going away from home.

This is usually the result of learning which has taken place over a long period. The dog pulls in anticipation of something exciting, usually a favourite walk, and the behaviour is reinforced because the anticipated run in the park always happens. Dogs repeat behaviour that is rewarded. In this case, removal of the reward together with removing the predictability of the reward is the answer.

To begin with, if possible, take the dog to any free running area in the car - this avoids the daily battle while re-training takes place (but beware of creating anticipatory excitement while travelling - take to shops, school run etc. in the car as well).

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Go for lots of boring lead-walks to nowhere, so there is nothing exciting for the dog to anticipate. Keep changing direction - if the dog pulls ahead, turn and go the other way. Reward with a titbit or game when he is in the correct position on a slack lead.

Keep stopping and starting. Teach the dog to sit at kerbs and at intervals on the way. Whenever he becomes excited, bring him back to heel and get him to sit, only continuing when he is calm.

Go for short walks up and down the road, then go home. When the dog has learned to walk to heel vary your daily walks and routes to get to them. Whenever the dog anticipates and starts to pull again, turn round and go home - by removing the reward, you remove the dog's incentive to pull.

2. Dog normally walks reasonably well on the lead, but lunges and pulls on seeing another dog or a person, cat, traffic etc.

3. Dog lunges & barks, behaving aggressively to dogs met while walking.

These two problems are similar, but the dog's reason for pulling may be different - it may be due to excitement, fear or dominant behaviour. In each case, it is necessary to break the dog's eye contact with whatever it is trying to get to in order to be able to correct and control the behaviour. The easiest way to achieve this is by use of a Halti - a head collar rather than an ordinary collar which works on the same principle as a halter or bridle on a horse; if you control the head, the rest of the animal will follow. By using the halti to turn the dog away and towards you, you are able to gain control.

If the dog is reacting nervously (this may manifest as aggression), you can then walk away from the perceived threat, or cross the road and pass at some distance with the dog under control, using a titbit or toy to reward the dog for walking nicely. Nervous aggression is always aggravated by a tight lead, as the dog feels trapped and uses aggression to chase the threat away. Avoid tightening the lead in anticipation when you see another dog approaching and don't keep the lead tight when using the halti - always slacken it again immediately the dog responds.

For over excitement, make the dog sit, and use the halti to turn him away as soon as he tries to lunge again. Reward him for sitting quietly while the other dog/person etc. passes. As he becomes more controllable, keep moving when you meet another dog, but stop and sit him if he tries to pull.

Over dominant behaviour can be controlled using a halti, but may be a symptom of other behavioural problems - if you think this is the case, contact the surgery for further advice.

4. Leaning sideways.

5. Lagging behind.

6. Pulling constantly, whether going away from or towards home.

These may be **avoidance behaviours**. Incorrect timing when using physical training methods (checking hard on the lead or choke chain, to bring the dog to heel) can result in a dog bracing itself on the lead and walking as far from its handler as possible.

For sideways leaning, try suddenly slackening the lead so the dog falls over, or walking next to a wall or barrier and using a titbit to encourage the dog to come in close. Male dogs that constantly lean on the lead to sniff at things can be corrected by use of a little dab of perfume or after-shave applied to the end of the dog's nose, just below the nostrils, just before going out for a walk - this has the effect of masking all other smells making sniffing pointless. This may be a territorial male problem, and if the sniffing is accompanied by frequent leg cocking, castration should be considered.

For lagging behind where nervousness is the problem, avoid pulling the dog along. Use a treat or toy as an incentive and walk just a few paces at a time, stopping to reward as soon as the dog responds, gradually increasing the distance as he becomes more confident - it can also be helpful to drive the car a short way and walk the dog to the car - this avoids having to reward a reluctant dog by taking him home, while still providing a safe haven to boost his confidence and reward him for walking away from home.

Occasionally, lagging may be a dominant behaviour used by bossy dogs to get their own way. Dominant dogs may also seem to keep getting tangled up in the lead by putting their feet over it as they walk. In this case, keep walking - don't stop, and let the dog disentangle himself. In this instance a degree of compulsion is often necessary - use the lead with forward checking movements, instead of pulling which enables the dog to brace himself and pull back. Praise and reward as soon as he stops fighting & walks correctly.

Constant forward pulling may be an avoidance behaviour, and the training above will effect a cure. However, in some cases it is due to over dominance - dogs which perceive themselves as the pack leader will try to "lead the way" and getting them to walk to heel is a constant battle. If this is the case, the underlying dominance needs to be corrected, and additional advice should be sought - please contact the surgery.

For more information
Please contact your Avonvale Vet

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