

What All Dogs Need Daily, yet It's Widely Ignored

Ignore this, and be prepared for the increased possibility that your beloved pup will live a shorter life with poorer quality of life and more disease potential. And you'll lose bonding opportunities galore.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- If your dog is a handful on a leash, there are ways to train/retrain good leash manners; there are also workarounds for bad habits like freezing and pulling on the leash
- Different types of daily walks, such as mentally stimulating walks and training walks, are a great way to keep your dog well-balanced in both body and mind

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Dogs are natural athletes, and in addition, most were (and many still are) bred with a specific purpose in mind, for example, sporting, working, hunting or herding. As a result, your canine companion, whether he's a purebred or a mixed breed, carries genetic traits that drive him to pursue an active lifestyle.

Unfortunately, many family dogs don't get opportunities to do what their breed instincts tell them to do. In addition, most dogs won't exercise consistently without an incentive, and most backyards don't provide enough sensory stimulation to ward off boredom indefinitely.

Bottom line, today's dogs need regular walks with their humans for both exercise and mental stimulation. They need (and love) to get outdoors, sniff, interact with their environment, exercise and socialize.

Many dog owners are very conscientious about walking their pets, but many others aren't. Perhaps you're a dog parent who doesn't walk your pet at all, or doesn't do it routinely. Maybe you don't make the most of your walks, or maybe you avoid the activity altogether because your dog has terrible leash manners.

First Things First: Training Your Dog to Wear a Collar, Harness and Leash

The best way to develop a healthy, positive, consistent dog walking habit is when your pet is a puppy. As soon as her immune system is strong enough to protect her from disease (discuss this with your veterinarian if you're not sure on the timing), she's good to go.

Your pup should already have her own secure-fitting collar or harness and ID tag, and she should be comfortable wearing it before you attempt to take her for walks. Some puppies have no problem wearing a collar right from the very beginning; others need a short period of adjustment.

If your dog is fighting her collar, as long as you're sure it isn't too tight (you should be able to easily slip your fingers under it) or uncomfortable for some other reason, distract her from fussing with it until she gets used to it. It shouldn't take more than a day or two for her to forget she's even wearing it.

If you plan to use a head halter or harness for walks (which is recommended for any dog at risk of injury from pulling against a collar/leash combination), the next step is to get puppy comfortable wearing it. As with the collar, this needs to happen before you attempt to attach a leash and head out the door.

Once wearing her collar and a halter or harness is no longer a big deal, you're ready for the next step. Attach about 4 feet of light line — cotton awning cord or light cotton rope will do — and let her drag it around the house under your watchful eye. Once she's used to the 4-foot line, swap it for a 10- to 15-foot line of the same material, and head outdoors.

Teaching Your Dog Good Leash Manners

Initial walks should be short, and primarily for the purpose of getting your dog used to being attached to you by a lead. Find a safe environment and allow puppy to drag the line behind him for a bit, and then pick up the opposite end. Let him lead you around for a few seconds while you hold the line just off the ground. Slow down so he's forced to slow down, ultimately to a stop. Take a short break for praise and a little playtime.

Next, let him trail the line again, but when you pick up your end this time, call him and stand still. If he pulls, hold your ground without pulling him in your direction. The goal is to teach him to put slack in the line himself by moving toward you. When he puts slack in the line, praise him and call him to you.

If he comes all the way to you, more praise and a **tasty treat** are in order. If he stops on his way to you, tighten the line just enough to apply a tiny bit of pull to it. Immediately call him to come again. Give praise as he moves toward you and treats when he comes all the way back. Two or three repetitions is all many puppies need to understand lack of tension in the line is what earns praise and treats.

When your pup has learned to come towards you to relieve tension on the line, you can begin backing up as he's coming towards you to keep him moving.

Next, turn and walk forward so he's following you. If he passes you, head in another direction so he's again behind you. The goal is to teach him to follow (not lead) on a loose lead. Once you've accomplished the goal, you can continue to use the light line or replace it with a leash.

Depending on your dog's temperament, five- to 15-minute sessions are sufficient in the beginning. Practice controlling him on the lead for 30-second intervals during each session. Exercise patience and don't engage in a battle of wills with him. Don't snap, yank or otherwise use the line for correction or punishment. Stop before either of you gets frustrated or tired.

After each short session on the lead, liberally praise your dog and spend a few minutes playing with him. The goal is to build the foundation for an activity both you and he will enjoy and look forward to throughout his life.

Correcting Bad Habits

Some puppies and untrained dogs naturally fight the pressure of the line rather than create slack. If your puppy freezes on a tight line or habitually pulls against it, use a halter or harness rather than a collar attached to the lead. Your dog can create serious neck and cervical disk problems by pulling on a collar/leash combination.

Also insure it's not you who's creating the problem. Your natural instinct may be to hold the leash taught, so you must also train yourself to keep slack in the line. Your dog's natural response to a tight line will be to pull against it. Next, do the following when your dog refuses to create slack or move toward you:

- Maintain the tension on the line and turn your back on her. Allow time for it to occur to her she can't win by pulling against you.
- Remain still with your back to her holding the tension in the line — don't jerk the line, don't pull or yank her toward you and don't put slack in the line yourself, which will teach her the way to get slack is to pull at the line.

The message you want to send your pup is that pulling on the lead doesn't accomplish a thing. It doesn't change the scenery and it doesn't earn praise or treats. Eventually, she'll stop doing what doesn't work, especially when she's rewarded every single time she performs a desirable behavior.

The very first second you begin leash training, make sure your puppy accomplishes nothing by pulling on the line. It takes some dogs longer than others to learn to keep slack in the leash, but with patience and persistence, any puppy can learn to follow on a loose lead.

Changing Up Your Dog Walks

Once your dog has developed good leash manners, it's best to vary the purpose of your walks with him. For example:

- **Potty walks** are purposeful walks, and are usually quick.
- **Mentally stimulating walks** allow your dog to stop, explore, **sniff and send pee-mail** and so on. Most dogs on a leash don't get to spend as much time sniffing and investigating as they would like. Allowing your canine companion some time to do doggy stuff is good for him mentally. Dogs gain knowledge of the world through their noses.
- **Power walks** during which you and your dog move at a pace of 4 to 4.5 miles an hour (about a 15-minute mile), will help him get the aerobic exercise he needs for good cardiovascular health. During these brisk walks there's no stopping to smell the roses.
- **Training walks** can be about improving leash manners, learning basic or advanced obedience commands, ongoing socialization — just about anything you can think of that can be done on a leashed walk.

Our dogs depend on us for their quality of life. Walking your dog every day and taking advantage of different types of walks to stimulate her mentally and physically will help her be well balanced, healthy and happy throughout her life.