

Teaching loose leash walking and heel

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If your dog has been pulling for awhile, you will need to be patient when trying these methods. Your dog has quite a reward history of getting what he wants (forward movement) by dragging you along. So it might take some time to convince him the rules have changed.

You will especially notice the bad habit when you progress from practicing indoors or in a low distraction environment, to going for a walk. The dog's habit during walks has been highly reinforced, so the environment becomes a cue to pull. If possible, it might help to do your first several walks in a completely new area. For example, if you normally walk in a suburb, go to a park trail. This will help cue the dog that the rules have changed. You'll eventually be able to go back to your original walking routes, but that's after the dog has some nice new habits to test out.

You may also find help by using some "power steering" equipment. Any snug harness that has a ring at the front where you can attach the leash works best. If the dog pulls, you'll be able to turn him around by controlling where his shoulders point. The leverage you have is increased dramatically by putting the clip at the dog's chest instead of the back of their neck. Another option is a head collar. It has the same sort of function as a halter on a horse. But be sure to introduce it in gradual steps with LOTS of treats. Most dogs don't like the halter on their face, so making it a fun thing and pairing it with treats can help. Both the front-attach harness and head collar employ physics, not pain, to get the job done.

Different dogs learn better with different methods. So if one of the methods below isn't working, try another. But be sure to give it time for your dog to catch on before you abandon a method as not working.

Using indirect access: "Penalty Yards Game"

This exercise works on loose leash walking, or the heel position. You will need food, a clicker, a helper, a leash, and your dog.



Heeling on Lead:

What is heeling? Heeling for obedience competition requires that the dog stay next to the handler's left side, with the dog's shoulder even with where a pants seam would be. The dog should be looking at the handler and remain in position regardless of where or how the handler moves.

The Dog Scout certification does not require the precision of obedience competition. It does require that the dog remain in heel position (or very close to it), on a loose lead, even when the person makes a turn or stop. Multiple cues or encouragement is allowed to keep the dog in position, but tightening the leash is not. Leash 'corrections' are prohibited.

Auto Sit: Another component of competition heeling is that the dog automatically sits (in heel position) when the handler stops. For the Dog Scout certification, the

dog does need to sit when the handler stops, but cueing the sit (with either verbal or hand signals) and sits out of heel position are allowed.

Note: Several of the things mentioned in the following section can be found in more detail on the "[How Dog's Learn](#)" page. Please read that before continuing.

Basics of heel:

Why dogs pull on leads (leashes): You know that dogs do what 'works' for them (Whatever gets them what they want). You also know that a rewarded behavior is one that will be repeated. Since dogs repeat pulling on the lead often, it must be getting rewarded. The reward is forward motion, which gets the dog new sights and smells.



How to stop the pulling: You learned that if a behavior fails to get a reward, the dog won't repeat it. So what you need to do is remove the reward (forward motion) when the dog pulls on the leash (the behavior you want to end).

The Set Up: To begin, you will mark a "start line." It can be a real mark on the ground, or simply any point that you can easily find again. About 15-20 feet away from the start line should be something the dog really wants. This can be a person encouraging the dog to come to him or her (without using your 'come' cue), or it could be food or a favorite toy, or it could be the door to the outside world when the dog wants to go for a walk.

No reward mark: It is helpful for this exercise if your dog understands a "No Reward Mark" (an NRM). This is a sound that lets the dog know that the behavior he just offered will not be getting a reward. It could be equated to the "cold" signal given in the 'Hot-Cold' game you may have played as a child.

Waist Leash: It is also helpful if you use a waist leash for this exercise that is adjusted to give a loose leash, but tight enough that the dog won't trip on it. The reason for this; everyone tends to want to either pull on the lead or 'help' the dog by giving more leash (or both). By using a waist leash that you don't hold with your hands, the dog gets to learn on his own, without your 'help' (which isn't really helping the dog learn).

Object of the game: Of course, is to get the dog to walk by your side, in heel position, all the way from the start line to the desired object.



Working on that goal: Start with yourself and the dog behind the start line. Be sure that the dog sees what is waiting for him at the other side. You can start with the dog either sitting or standing at your left side, your choice. Begin by walking toward the object that the dog desires.

"Oops, try again" – No Reward Mark

Of course, as soon as you take a step or two, the dog is likely to pull out ahead

of you. You need to have a clear picture in your mind of exactly where 'too far in front of you' is located. Know where that imaginary line between "heeling" and 'not heeling' is located. As soon as the dog crosses the line, you mark the point of no reward with your No Reward Mark (NRM) and get back to the start line AS FAST AS YOU CAN!

Start over FAST

The timing of the NRM and a quick re-start are critical to the dog's understanding of the game. To help your dog understand the unwanted behavior (moving ahead of you) and the consequence (having to start over) you need to make the timing of the two as close together as possible.

If you delay your move back to the start until the dog has stopped pulling on the lead and is looking at you; guess what he will associate with having to start over? He will think that not pulling, and looking at you was the unwanted behavior! If instead, you go back to the start as soon as the dog moves past heel position (even before the leash gets tight), it will be much more clear to the dog what behavior caused the NRM and consequence. Just be patient with him and he will begin to understand.

Motivation

The more motivated the dog is to get across the game field, the faster he will try to figure out what is causing the delay. If the dog takes a few steps in heel position, be sure to 'catch him in the act' of doing the proper behavior and praise it.

Notice I didn't say click

A click means that the dog has done what you want (which he has), but it also says the behavior is over (which it isn't) and he gets his reward (which he hasn't reached yet). Praise lets the dog know he's on the right track without ending the behavior. If you were to click half way to the prize, you would have to be able to ensure that the dog didn't pull (and then get rewarded) before he gets to the other side of the game field.

If praise causes pulling ahead

If you praise your dog for being in the proper position and that causes him to surge ahead, give a No Reward Mark and go back to the start. The dog simply has not learned that praise means 'keep going, you're doing it right'. The NRM will not remove the reward of the praise; it will simply help clarify for the dog what the praise means. The praise is important to let the dog know that he's doing it correctly.

Most dogs get it quick

Most dogs are able to quickly figure out what is going on if your timing is clear. You should be able to see improvement in as few as 10 repetitions (going back to start). Once the dog figures out the 'rules of the game', most are able to then get almost completely across the field while staying in heel position.



Don't give in too soon

A common problem occurs, as the dog is just about to get to the other side. They just can't contain themselves any longer and make a quick burst across the finish. This also means they left heel position too early and should not get rewarded (be sure he can't get rewarded)! Don't give in too early; it doesn't help the dog. Just be ready for the burst and the need to make the move for the start line as soon as the dog breaks out of heel position. It will only take another try or two before the dog isn't 'cheating' at the end.



He made it!

When the dog finally makes it all the way across the game field while maintaining his self control and staying in heel position, pile on the rewards! It's a big accomplishment and should be treated as such.

Add a release cue

You won't want your dog to be the one to decide when the heeling game is over once he understands the cue. Now he needs to learn the cue for "Alright, you can resume your normal doggie life". Common 'release' cues are: all done, you're free, finished, and 'Okay'. I don't recommend using 'okay' because the dog is likely to hear it often. It can be any word you are likely to remember as a cue that tells your dog he is 'released' from the behavior. This cue can also be used to release your dog from a 'stay' cue. You will be adding the cue you choose just before the dog gets to the reward. Later, you will use it to signal when the dog no longer needs to maintain heel position.

Try it again

Now you need to repeat the exercise because your dog still doesn't know how to heel. What he does know is that to get from the start line to the finish line, he has to walk by your side. He will not generalize that behavior to other situations yet.

Put it on cue

Once the dog is reliably walking across the game field without having to go back to the start, you can add the verbal cue. You will give the "Heel" cue *just before* you leave the start line (not AS you leave it). Practice the exercise a few more times to help make the association between the behavior and the cue.

Generalization

The next step in the training is to get your dog to realize that walking by your side is beneficial to him, regardless of the circumstances. Start by setting up the above game again in a new location with a new reward. It's normal to have to do some re-starts. Once the dog is 'getting it' again, you can add the verbal cue just before you leave the start.

Now you will need to get the dog to understand that even if you are just walking down a street or trail, heel means heel. When you are walking with your dog, he is in it for the sights



and smells and (in most cases) socialization with any other being he meets. If you want to practice heel, just make an imaginary start line and play the game above. Don't forget to use your release cue to let the dog know when he can go back to being a dog that is just out for a walk.

No more leash pulling

You will find that once your dog fully understands the 'heel' cue, you will no longer have a dog that drags you around by the leash. This is further reinforced if you practice the 'tight leash means look at me' exercise. When the dog forgets his manners, just stop (removing the reward of forward motion). When the dog remembers that it's a loose leash, not pulling that gets him what he wants (forward motion), you can proceed.

Once the dog understands this concept, you can use it anytime there is something in front of the dog that he wants. That something (the dog park, a squirrel, forward movement on a walk) can take the place of the helper in the above scenario. When the dog maintains heel for as long as you want (don't expect too much too soon) you can reward him with what he wants. This could be going into the dog park, chasing the squirrel up a tree or getting to go at the pace he chooses on the walk.) The more often and the more places the dog practices this, the better he will be at snapping into place instead of pulling!

Another Method is the "choose to heel" method:

You'll need a space big enough to walk around, a clicker and your dog's favorite reward(s) –no leash needed. This will go much faster if the dog understands what a click means and you understand how to use the clicker with proper timing.

You want to start in a boring room of your home so the odds are better the dog will want to pay attention to you. You want to set the dog up to succeed, not fail. ☺ The dining room will work if you have one. It should be an area where you can walk around at a decent pace without the dog being distracted by stuff nearby.

Once you have your area, the clicker under your finger, the dog's favorite reward on you, you are ready. Start walking around. If the dog happens to get into heel position, click at the moment he's in the right position and reward the dog by putting the food right by your left leg. As soon as the dog takes the reward, you'll turn around and walk the other direction.

You want the dog to have to work to find heel position. You won't make this too hard at first, but as the dog catches on to the game you might need to get creative with your movements to make the dog work at getting back into the click zone. Your pace should be quick, it helps the dog get excited about moving. If you are shuffling along, the dog will get bored. You aren't saying anything to the dog because attention and fun sounds should happen when he's in the right position. Otherwise, your encouragement could act as a reward to the dog for being out of position. Stay silent till the dog gets it right.

If the dog isn't getting it, try moving faster, jog if you need too! Also move in a circle with the dog on the inside. If the dog is distracted, increase the value of the reward. You

should have something the dog really, really loves. Check the list of 101+ rewards at www.DogScouts.org for ideas. Try to set the dog up for success so you can click and reward him. Stick with it! Some dogs take longer to catch on than others. But once they figure out that all they need to do is stay beside you to get clicks and rewards, they will stick like glue!

Be sure you don't add a cue for heel until the dog is at the "sticking like glue" stage. THAT is what you want "heel" to mean, not a half-hearted sort of in position behavior. If you are saying "heel" when your dog is out of position, then that's what they will think the cue means (be out of position!)

Once you have a hard time getting the dog out of heel position, you are ready to increase the difficulty a bit. Try a slightly more distracting area and start over. You'll go back to small circles with a quick pace and the dog's favorite reward. If you have moved outdoors, the dog can be on leash, but the leash is only a safety line not a guide or cue. Let the dog figure out that the rules of the game have not changed.

Once the dog has caught on in that area, try a new area. Continue to do this in several different areas. You can also use this method when you are out for a walk. If the dog happens to take a step or two in heel position, click it and give the dog a reward.

U-Turns method

You'll need a leash, clicker and your dog's favorite treats.

Start at your front door. If the dog bolts out the door, turn around and walk back in. when he's with you again, try going out the door again. Your whole first session may be going in and out of the door if your dog has self-control issues. You may want to work on a few of the self-control exercises found in the top of the "behavior Problems" section of article links.

Once you are out of the house, if the dog is not pulling the leash tight, you can walk forward. If the leash goes tight you will turn around and walk the other way. Most dogs don't want to go back the way they just came because they have already "been there, done that" so they might be less inclined to pull.

When the dog is next to you (however briefly) you want to click that moment. The dog may or may not take a treat, but if the dog wants forward motion more than treats you can use forward motion as the reward.

At first, you might not get very far. You'll feel like a Yo-Yo going back and forth, back and forth over the same ground. But eventually you will notice that the dog isn't shooting ahead quite as fast when you turn around. Then they might stay next to you for a step or two before shooting or drifting ahead. Remember to click when the dog is in position! Even if you aren't working on a competition heel, think of how nice it will be when you can go for a walk and your dog chooses to stay next to you on a loose leash instead of dragging you around from pee-mail to pee-mail.

POST method

This one tends to work best in combo with one of the other methods. You'll need a leash, clicker and your dog's favorite treats.

Start by playing the “Penalty Yards” in the first section. That will teach the dog that the leash going tight is a cue, not just a reason to pull harder. In this method, if the dog tightens the leash, you will simply stop and wait for the dog to loosen the leash. As soon as the leash is loose you’ll move forward again. Do NOT give the dog much leash! The idea is that he walks next to you on a loose leash. So you only need to give him enough leash so that it CAN get loose if he’s next to you. It should get tight as soon as the dog is out of position. Otherwise, the tight leash cue is much too late and the dog won’t associate it with getting out of position.

If you have done several of the self-control exercises found at www.DogScouts.org and you use one or more of the other methods in this training guide, you’ll find this post methods works well as a “reminder” to the dog that he is supposed to be by your side.

You can use an occasional “go sniff” cue as a reward for polite walking. That way, you are still using what the dog wants (checking the neighborhood pee mail) in exchange for what you want (a pleasant walk.)