

Leash Manners

Puppies and leashes go together like frogs and unicycles — not really a natural combination. I know that walking a dog on a leash looks easy when other people do it, but it is really a difficult thing for the puppy and new owner to master.

I think that the goal of leash manners is to be able to walk the dog on leash without lunging, tugging and pulling. Unfortunately it takes more than snapping on a leash to take the dog for a pleasant walk. Let's start with collars. There is absolutely no reason for a puppy to be wearing anything but a buckle collar. These can be nylon webbing with a plastic snap, or leather with a metal buckle — and don't forget the ID tag. I like the nylon collars that are adjustable because the puppies grow quickly. Make sure and check the collar at least weekly. The collar should be relatively loose but not so loose that the puppy can slip out of it. A general rule of thumb is that two (sideways) fingers should fit between collar and puppy — about an inch or so.

The leash can match the collar, or provide a nice contrast — this is really owner preference. I would skip any heavy leashes (for example, metal) and I personally like nylon for a puppy because it is easy to clean and lightweight. I think an eight-foot leash is a nice length, although six feet can also work well.

In addition to collar, leash and puppy, you will need lots of yummy, soft, small treats for your leash walking training session. My choice is string cheese because it is easy on their tummies, can be broken into small bites, and is soft enough to chew quickly. If you use crunchy treats, you will spend half the time waiting for the puppy to chew and swallow the treats! The goal of these sessions is training — not going on walks. If you start with the idea that you are training, you will be less likely to become frustrated when your progress is about ten feet.

The way that our puppy will learn leash manners is quite simple — we will attach the leash and basically ignore it (the leash – not the puppy!). Instead we will encourage our puppy to follow us by talking and also by regularly (every few steps at first) bending over, petting the puppy and giving a treat. The puppy will not notice the leash, but will quickly understand that following the human is quite fun and rewarding.

Dogs (and humans) will continue to offer a behavior that is reinforced. If we wish to make a behavior go away, the best way to handle it is to ignore it. Therefore, you can see that walking on a leash nicely with no reinforcement quickly results in the dog NOT walking nicely. So reward what you want to see more, and as best as you can, ignore what is not desired.

What if the puppy sees something very interesting and proceeds to race off to investigate, but hits the end of the leash? Excellent question because this will happen many times, and your response is important. With a small puppy, I will stop, stand still and wait until the puppy loses interest or turns to see what I am doing. At that point I will do what it takes to get the puppy back to me in a fun and happy way. This means I might

clap my hands, offer food, walk backwards, use a toy, sing — whatever! What I will not do is reel the puppy in like a big fish.

My objective is to help the puppy understand that nothing happens when she tries to pull away when on a leash but that paying attention is very positive and rewarding. Therefore, I never move when the puppy is pulling on the leash but as soon as it is loose I begin talking, rewarding and moving in order to reinforce that a loose leash is a good thing.

My goal in puppy training is to avoid bad habits. I am not interested in correcting a puppy for "bad" behavior, but simply want the puppy to learn the "right" way so that it becomes a habit. If I see that I am going to have to walk the puppy past a group of kids eating hot dogs, I am not even going to give that a try — I will pick her up. As the puppy gets older and learns a reliable "leave it", I would be willing to pass such a distraction but choose your battles with puppies, and do remember they are babies and need our help in forming good habits. A young puppy will not be able to pass kids eating hot dogs without carrying on and pulling, so just pick her up and avoid allowing her to engage in that behavior.

When I taught puppy kindergarten, I was always amazed at what people thought a puppy "should" be able to do, and what kinds of temptations a puppy "should" be able to resist. Should a two year old be able to resist rat poison? Should a toddler be able to resist the flames on a stove? No, of course not and so we manage the environment to keep the baby safe and this is what a puppy needs as well.

Help the puppy succeed by having realistic expectations, and by rewarding the behaviors you appreciate. When teaching leash manners, this means avoiding big temptations, and rewarding a loose leash. It is normal and expected that you will need to pay 100% attention to the puppy when training to walk on a leash, and that you will need to talk and encourage the puppy to stay with you.

Another common issue I encountered when teaching puppy kindergarten was the belief that the puppy should walk on one side as if to heel. I do not teach heeling to a puppy. In fact, I never heel my dogs on walks. When I am walking the dogs, they may go wherever they want as long as I am not pulled. They get to have fun and be dogs on walks. Heeling well is a very difficult exercise that I take over two years to teach my dogs, and I teach them in training sessions and not on walks. I encourage you to let the puppies be puppies and not ask for any position while walking — learning to not pull will be hard enough!

And speaking of pulling.... The normal and expected behavior of a dog (or mule!) when pulled is to pull back. Therefore it is ineffective and rather silly to think that we will teach nice leash manners by dragging the puppy — all they will do is want to go the opposite direction! When a puppy pulls, just stop and wait for the leash to be loose and then reinforce that. Also, think about your own behavior — what did you do to cause the puppy to pull? Were you quiet and boring? Did you expect too much? Have you been allowing pulling? Some self-awareness goes a long way when training a new puppy.

Finally, all dogs gets wild and excited sometimes and none of us are perfect dog trainers. Have patience with your puppy and yourself. Dog training is not easy at all, but if you are consistent, kind and patient the rewards are wonderful.