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Leash Skills for Dog Walking

General Information

Many studies show that humans who live with dogs are healthier. One reason is that dog owners exercise more. If your dog drags you, lunges, or tangles you in the leash while walking, that's not much of an exercise at all! Those kinds of walks are not fun. Pulling on the leash is one of the most common unwanted behaviors for dogs. Working with your pet is key to making walking more pleasant for the both of you.

One type of leash skill is the formal "heel". This should only be used in certain situations. Heeling requires that the dog be intensely focused on you. This is very tiring for the dog and doesn't allow him the freedom to sniff and explore, which is important for his mental and emotional well being. If you would like to teach a heel command, use it only when you need extra control - when crossing the street or walking in a crowd.

Work on loose leash walking with your pet for more relaxed and enjoyable walks. Both human and canine can benefit from establishing leash skills: you won't be pulled around and your dog can have a little bit of freedom to sniff and explore. Remember that dog training is a two-way street that requires training at both ends of the leash. Review and apply the tips below on leash skills to have more enjoyable walks with your dog.

Addressing the Problem

It is important to understand that if your dog is pulling on the leash it is because she gets where she wants to go faster by pulling you. Instead, we want to teach your dog that tension on the leash means stop and to never allow pulling on the leash. Here is a way to start this training approach:

- First, decide what position you want your dog to walk in. Most people refer to this as heel position.
- Start with tasty treats in a low distraction environment. With your dog to your side, take two to three steps forward as you keep your dog's focus. Stop. Using a treat in your hand, lure your pet into a sit. Again. Step forward two to three steps while keeping your dog's focus. Follow with an automatic sit to your side when you stop walking. As your dog gets the concept, slowly add more steps between stops followed by gradually fading the use of treats. Any time your dog pulls, stop and start over with your dog to your side.
- Never jerk or pull back on the leash. Teach your dog to respond to commands such as watch me, leave it, with me, and wait. When your dog gets distracted, use an established command to redirect your dog's attention from the distraction.
- In some cases, like with heavy pullers, start your walk by walking backwards and encourage your dog to follow you. Once your dog is focused, change your body's direction so that you are facing the same direction as your dog.
- On walks, change directions often and reward your dog liberally everytime she looks at you or checks in.
- With guidance from a dog trainer, use training tools such as a no-pull harness or head halter.
- Exercise! A tired dog is a good dog.
- Provide outlets for mental and physical energy.
- Teach basic obedience and practice often.
- Seek help from a professional when other options have been exhausted.