



Leash Training for Puppies

Canine Behavior Series

A puppy may refuse to budge while on leash one day, and try to drag you down the street on the same leash the very next day! Dogs who walk well on leash face fewer dangers and have more fun. It's well worth the time to develop this skill with your puppy.

What's this Thing on My Neck?

The first step in leash training is to get the pup used to a collar. Expect the pup to scratch at it. Put the collar on when the pup is eating and playing under your supervision. Distract the puppy from thinking about the collar.

Remove the collar only at a time when the pup is NOT trying to get out of it. If you take the collar off when the pup is obsessing over getting it off, you encourage the pup to fight the collar. To the puppy, it seems that fighting the collar worked, and got that nasty collar removed!

Just like wearing a watch or a ring feels strange to you at first, the strange sensation of a collar can annoy a dog. In the same way that your senses habituate to the jewelry, the dog will get used to the collar when handled properly. Of course the collar needs to fit and should not be of a stiff or uncomfortable design. A lightweight nylon collar with a buckle or snap is a good choice.

Remove the collar whenever your pup goes into the crate. Consult your dog's breeder and veterinarian about safety with the particular breed or mix as far as leaving a collar on when the dog is outside unsupervised. Ideally a puppy wouldn't be left outside unsupervised, but if the puppy is going to be in this situation, the risks must be weighed. Some breeds are especially prone to the collar catching on something and strangling the dog (the reason collars are to be removed whenever a dog is crated). On the other hand, a dog left outside unsupervised is at risk of being lost, and collar identification saves dogs' lives. Both of these risks are also factors for dogs outside in covered kennel runs.

Some puppy breeders give you a head start on leash-training your new puppy by tying a piece of colored yarn or rickrack around the neck of each pup. This practice varies from breeder to breeder and from breed to breed-what's ideal for some is not a good idea for others. Whether the breeder has done this or not, your puppy will likely start ignoring the sensation of wearing a collar within a few days of your conditioning.

Is This Another Tail or a Toy?

The next step is to add a leash. Some pups seem overwhelmed by an entire leash all at once. In these cases you can start with a string, shoelace, or something of the sort. Add length as the puppy gets used to it.

Experienced dog people learn that chewed leashes can be useful later, and this is one of those times. Dogs tend to chew through leashes several inches from the snap. This leaves a "tab" of leash material with a handy snap on it to attach and detach easily from the collar. Tabs occasionally come in handy for other training, too, so if your mouthy young dog "creates" one for you from a leash, be sure to save it!

Attach the leash or the short item to the collar when the puppy is eating or playing, and let the pup get used to it being there. As with the collar, don't remove it when pup is making a fuss about it. Remove it at a time the pup has forgotten it's there.

Do not leave a leash on an unattended dog. It can catch on things and trap the dog in dangerous and traumatic situations. Leashes are only safe during supervised times.

Distract your puppy into play or other interaction with you whenever the puppy seems bothered by the leash or starts to chew it. It's fine to apply Bitter Apple to the leash, but realize this substance does not last long as a chewing deterrent, and will need to be reapplied for every session. Doing this can keep leash-chewing from ever becoming a habit, and save you money, work and the worry of a loose dog.

Training Techniques

Before you pick up the other end of the leash with it attached to the puppy, you need to first put in some time conditioning your puppy to come to you and to move with you. Treats are ideal for this training. Don't be afraid the puppy will always need treats to walk on a leash. Leash walking has its own rewards, but a young puppy doesn't know that yet. The treats will help get things moving in the

right direction.

Feeding time is a good time to work on this conditioning, when you have the dish in your hand and an eager puppy at your feet. Back away from the puppy. Use your body language and the puppy's name to attract the puppy to follow. Move around a bit with your puppy, making it a fun game, before putting down the dish and thus delivering a great reward.

At other times when your puppy is likely to be interested in games and treats, use a bit of food from the puppy's next meal to condition the puppy to look at you and move with you [see article [Attention, Please!](#)]. Keep moving away from the puppy, encouraging the puppy to follow you. Young puppies naturally do this anyway, so the training is easy and fun.

At all times, be prepared to reward your puppy with little treats, games and other things the puppy likes, for moving with you, coming to you, and looking at you. Make this a habit, and develop your body language and voice to what works best with THIS puppy.

Each puppy is different. Pups have different things they like best, and different things they respond to in different ways. You can build your puppy's desires to interact with you by how you use your praise, treats, petting, and the games you and your puppy play together. All of this factors into your leash training as well as all other training, both in puppyhood and later.

The Leash Has Two Ends

With your puppy used to the presence of the leash attached to the collar and used to moving with you, you're ready to pick up the free end of the leash. Now it's time to visualize the real goal of leash walking.

When a dog freezes up on leash and won't move, obviously you can't get anywhere. So part of the goal is for the dog to relax when wearing a leash. You're off to the right start there, having conditioned your dog to the presence of the leash with no pressure.

A dog pulling on leash can suffer damage to the throat, which is potentially very serious in some breeds. The person trying to hold the other end of the leash may not be able to control the pulling dog, and can even be injured. Therefore a huge part of our goal in leash training is to teach the dog to walk with the leash LOOSE, no pulling. This is not only for the purpose of having control, but also to be humane to the dog.

Ironically, it's not the dog who causes the pulling-on-leash problem. Humans instinctively hold the leash tight. A dog's completely normal and natural response to a tight leash is to pull. If the dog did not pull against the pressure, the dog would be constantly off-balance.

From the first minute you pick up the leash, keep it loose. Follow the dog at times, and at other times use the skills you have been developing to induce your dog to follow you. Resist the impulse to pull the dog around on leash, or even to guide the dog with the leash. Work hard at remembering to communicate through your voice, body language and various motivators. Keep building those abilities! Keep your attention on your mental communication with the dog, rather than trying to communicate through the leash.

If your puppy makes an attempt to pull you, your job is to stand still. The message to the puppy is simply that pulling on the leash is fruitless. It doesn't work. When things don't work, people and dogs eventually quit doing those things! You can help yourself and your puppy so very much by making sure that right from the start, pulling on the leash never works for your puppy. Then pulling will never become a habit, and your puppy will be spared innumerable problems-as will you!

As soon as the puppy notices that trying to pull you didn't work because you stopped, switch into your attention-getting, puppy-follow-me mode, and get that puppy moving with you! This is the game. And to a puppy, it really does need to be a game. Make it fun for the puppy. It will be fun for you, too, and that's one of the great benefits of living with dogs!

A Great Start

If this training seems like a lot of effort, the truth is that raising a puppy IS a lot of effort. The puppy is constantly learning, no matter what you do or don't do. It's actually less work, and much more fun, to shape the learning in the right direction. Doing a good job of conditioning your puppy to the leash helps with many other important dog behaviors at the same time. Have a great time leash-walking with your puppy!

Kathy Diamond Davis is the author of the book [Therapy Dogs: Training Your Dog to Reach Others](#). Should the training articles available here or elsewhere not be effective, contact your veterinarian. Veterinarians not specializing in behavior can eliminate medical causes of behavior problems. If no medical cause is found, your veterinarian can refer you to a colleague who specializes in behavior or a local behaviorist.

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