

Training a Shelter Dog

Expert advice on teaching a rescue dog your rules.

September Morn

Loose-Leash Walking: Clip the leash to your dog's collar, say, "lets go," and start to walk. If your dog races ahead, stop as the leash goes taut. Stand still until your dog stops pulling, then proceed again. If pulling continues more than three seconds after you stop, slowly back up.

When the dog notices it's losing ground, it will turn and look at you, loosening the leash. Click, praise and start forward again. For most dogs, being allowed to walk forward is reward enough; some will even refuse treats in their eagerness to go ahead. Some dogs prefer a treat and walking forward. Be sure to reward your dog with something it actually wants.

Polite walking takes practice and repetition. Your dog will eventually realize that pulling activates your brakes, not your accelerator. Note: if your dog's strength outmatches yours or it pulls so hard it gasps, talk to a trainer about a head collar. This dog-sized version of a horse halter works by passive restraint and leverage, not pain or force, to gently turn the dogs head to the side when it pulls. Although the collar is painless and safe, some dogs take a while to accept wearing one.

Good Manners

Patience: Teach patience at feeding time. Put your dog's dinner in its bowl, then, instead of serving it, leave the bowl on the counter and go sit down. Ignore the dog for 10 minutes. After that, get up, call your dog and give it dinner.

This strategy is also useful for other highly charged events, like a walk or ride. Get everything ready, put on your walking shoes or grab your car keys, pick up your dogs leash, then sit down and read for 10 or 15 minutes. After that, tell your dog "Okay, lets go," and take it on the outing you promised. Your dog will learn that all things happen in their own time and will develop patience.

Politeness to guests: For good manners with visitors, teach your dog to sit or lie on a mat near the door when people arrive. Involve guests in the training process, having them ignore your dog when it's pushy and pet or give treats when it's polite.

Preventing food guarding: Some dogs are possessive of food and may growl or snap if they fear losing it. Your dog needs to understand that having people around while it's eating is a good thing. The following techniques teach that people are food-bringers, not food-takers.

- Feed your dog some of its dinner by hand each day. (Have all household members do this.)
- Feed only half of the dog's ration, then pick up the empty bowl, add the second helping and serve.
- Talk quietly and gently stroke your dog while it's eating, and then drop a few goodies into its bowl.
- Take away the bowl while your dog's eating, add delicious goodies and give it right back.

The vast majority of adopted shelter dogs have pretty much the same issues related to lack of training that any dog might have. The cure for lack of training? That's an easy one: Training! Schultz says, "Teaching to walk nicely on leash, sit politely for greeting, and what's legal to chew and what they should avoid is important to all dogs. Most shelter dogs just needed somebody to spend the time teaching them appropriate behavior." Now yours is lucky — it has you.