

## Teach Your Dog to Walk

### Fix four common walking problems.

*Sally Deneen*

A squirrel scampered into view as Barbara Nunnemacher walked her untrained 80-pound German Shepherd Dog mix. The nearly 1-year-old bolted after the squirrel. The force of the takeoff snapped a tendon in Nunnemacher's shoulder, severing it completely. Pain shot through her shoulder.

That did it.

Nunnemacher turned to a dog trainer.

"It wasn't her fault at all. She was a puppy. She saw a squirrel. I got a trainer involved because I could not walk her," says Nunnemacher, of Kansas, who considers Tessie "her best friend in the world."

After a few private lessons, Tessie did an about-face, and her success prompted her trainer to suggest that she become a therapy dog. Today, eight years later, Tessie has become the first dog to earn the Animals Love Our Veterans award from the Department of Kansas/Veterans of Foreign Wars for her many hours of cuddling with appreciative patients at the Dwight D. Eisenhower Medical Center.

How did Tessie go from a relentless puller to a polite walker? Her trainer and other experts share tips for identifying common dog-walking problems and solving them:

#### 1. Leash pulling

**Problem:** Like many young dogs, untrained Tessie walked her owner — not the other way around. "She just pulled me. We went where she wanted to go," Nunnemacher says.

**Solution:** Randomly change directions every time the dog pulls you. Your dog learns that his jobs are to keep track of you and maintain slack in the leash. "It's about leadership," says Tessie's trainer, Ken Baechtold of GentleDogTraining.com, in Kansas. "If your dog is dragging you down the street, you're definitely not in charge."

Practice in the backyard, a park, or indoors. Place your dog on a 15-foot leash, Baechtold says. Begin walking. Every time the dog bolts in his favored direction, change course. Unpredictably turn right or left. Eventually, the dog learns: "Hey, when I try to go somewhere, it doesn't work!" Sherry Woodard, dog training consultant at Best Friends Animal Society in Utah, also suggests trying this with a lead as short as 4 feet.

**Another technique:** Stop in your tracks each time your dog pulls. The moment the leash slackens, praise your pal, quickly offer a tiny treat, and take a big step. He may take off like a rabbit, so stand your ground until he calms down. Repeat the process, taking one step, then eventually two steps and more steps as he learns to walk calmly.

Your pet will learn new rules, says Dee Ganley, a certified pet dog trainer who runs the Upper Valley Humane Society Training Center in New Hampshire. If he keeps the leash slack, the walk will continue. If he moves ahead and pulls, the walk stops.

Before any walk, it helps to burn off excess energy by playing. That way, your less-excited pooch can focus on the walk.

**When to ask for help:** Turn to a trainer if you see little change. For quick results, some trainers will suggest using a training collar or lead, such as a head halter, which has one strap that wraps around the dog's muzzle and another that goes behind the ears. When the dog pulls, your gentle tug on the leash turns his head toward you.

#### 2. Lunging at passersby

**Problem:** Few things mortify a dog owner more than when a beloved pet rears up on his hind legs and lunges menacingly at passing dogs or people.

**Solution:** Take note of what sets off your pet. Maybe he lunges only at dogs that pass within 6 feet, but tolerates those 7 feet away.

Next, practice. See a dog heading your way on the sidewalk? Don't tense up. Stay upbeat. Think: "Oh boy! A dog!" Otherwise, your dog may sense your tension and become nervous or excited himself. Using a toy or a bit of some irresistible treat, lure — don't drag — your excited friend to the side of the path, then stop at a comfortable distance (in this example, 7 feet away).

Continually praise and feed treats as the strange dog passes by. Pet your pal. Conduct several sessions like this, each a few minutes long, over several days.

Your dog will come to associate other dogs with good things, thanks to the treats. Some pets immediately turn to their walkers to seek a treat instead of lunging at a dog, notices Suzanne Tyler, a certified pet dog trainer at Greywolf Veterinary Hospital in Washington, who recommends head halters to instantly give owners good control.

Once your pet anticipates a treat upon seeing a strange dog, you should be able to allow the unknown dog to pass closer.

When to ask for help: If this process isn't working or your dog's outbursts are more than you can handle, seek advice from a trainer or animal behavior consultant.

### 3. Bounding out the door

**Problem:** Your dog goes ballistic and leaps out the door, dragging you helplessly behind from the get-go.

**Solution:** Tell him to sit before going through any door or gate. At first he'll excitedly jump, run in circles and whine, but eventually he'll notice the walk isn't proceeding. He'll finally sit.

**Another technique:** Leash your pet, walk out the door, turn around, enter the house, and unsnap the leash, advises animal behaviorist Ian Dunbar, author of *Doctor Dunbar's Good Little Dog Book* (James & Kenneth Publishers, 2003). Repeat this several times. Your dog will grow progressively cooler-headed, if not bored.

**When to ask for help:** Turn to a dog trainer if this doesn't work, especially if you risk injury from a fall caused by an strong and overzealous pooch.

### 4. Chasing squirrels

**Problem:** So many temptations can distract a dog during a walk. A chicken bone lies by a dumpster. A squirrel darts within view. How can a dog resist pursuit?

**Solution:** Teach him the Leave It command in a room without distractions or other dogs. Place a treat on the floor beyond the reach of your leashed pet and say, "Leave it." Your dog will strain to get it, but don't let him touch it. Cover the treat with your foot, if needed. When he eventually gazes at you, say "Yes," praise him, and give him a different, tastier treat.

**Practice over time.** When your dog has clearly learned the lesson, vary the routine. Perhaps throw a treat or desired toy at a distance, and tell your dog to "Leave it." Later, when you encounter a squirrel on a walk, tell him, "Leave it."

**When to ask for help:** Your safety is paramount. Turn to a trainer if the above steps don't calm your pet around squirrels and cats. A trainer may recommend a new collar and provide other techniques for teaching Leave It.

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