

Canine – Controlling Pulling

Why do dogs tend to pull and forge ahead?

Dogs tend to pull ahead and lunge forward for a number of reasons. The primary reason for most dogs (at least initially) is that they are exploratory, playful, and social, and that they are motivated to investigate new areas, new odors and new people or new dogs as well as areas where exciting things have been found in the past. The more they pull, the faster they get where



they are going. As you pull backwards in an attempt to restrain your dog, he/she is likely to resist by pulling forward even harder, since most dogs tend to pull against pressure. Although perhaps not a scientifically accurate term, this is often referred to as an opposition reflex. Dogs that are aggressive to stimuli (e.g. children, other dogs), and those that have the urge to chase or herd (e.g. joggers, cyclists) may pull ahead in an attempt to chase. Dogs that are fearful or defensive may be more aggressive when restrained by a leash since they are unable to escape and more likely to

defend their personal space or their family members (defensive or protective aggression). In addition, depending on the type of collar and your response, each time you pull back on the leash you may be further adding to your dog's anxiety, and therefore its defensiveness. Fearful dogs or those otherwise reluctant to leave home may be pulling and forging ahead on their way back home.

How can pulling and forging ahead be controlled?

It is a shame when owners are unable to engage in the simple joy of walking their dog due to extreme leash pulling. The dog should be taught through obedience training, lures and rewards to respond to the 'heel' or "steady" command. Training should begin in an environment where success can be ensured. Using a control mechanism (leash and collar, leash and head halter), and highly motivating rewards, the dog should first be taught to walk at the owner's side. During the first few training sessions distractions should be avoided so that the rewards and motivation keep the dog's interest and attention. If the dog begins to pull ahead, pulling backwards on the leash and a neck collar leads to resistance from the dog, causing the dog to lunge forward more intensely. It is best to take 1-2 steps at a time and keep your dog in the correct position, rather than trying to accomplish a long walk. If the dog pulls the leash taut, stop and wait till the dog returns to a slack leash position before rewarding and continuing. As the dog learns *where* to be in relation to the owner, gradually walk a few more steps. Set the dog up



to succeed. This can often be accomplished using a food reward held at thigh level to keep the dog's nose in position.

The head halter is one of the best means of gaining immediate control. It is discussed in detail in our handout on 'Head halter training'. When the dog is wearing a head halter and pulls ahead, a pull on the leash will cause your dog's head to turn toward you. Then as you pull upwards and forward, the dog will pull backwards into a sit. Quickly release tension and reward. Continue along your walk and anytime the dog begins to pass you pull forward and upward and your dog should begin to back up. It is not necessary to get a 'sit' with each pull, only a dog that stays beside or just behind you with a slack leash as you walk. If your dog is walking with a head halter and he pulls to the end of the leash, his head will turn backwards toward you. At this point one option is to turn and walk in the other direction (in which case the dog will again be behind you).

In order to teach the dog to walk by your side, you should start before you exit your front door. Have your dog 'sit' and 'stay' and then open the front door. If the dog begins to run out, pull up and forward so that the dog returns to the 'sit', then release and try again. Walk slowly forward so that you are between the dog and the door, slowly lengthening the leash while the dog remains in place, but leaving no more than an inch or two of slack. Provided the dog does not forge ahead, step through the door and then allow the dog to follow up to (but not past) you. Proceed into the yard with the dog following. Any time the dog begins to step or forge past, the leash can be pulled up and forward so that the dog backs up, and released immediately when the dog is in place. Although the dog could be made to sit each time it pulls forward, the goal is to have the dog back up just far enough that it remains at your side. The tension on the leash is then released and the dog is encouraged to walk forward. In short, pulling tends to lead to tension, while walking at your side earns release (i.e. a slack leash). If the dog "puts on the brakes" and will not follow, a tendency is to pull ahead, but, as mentioned, dogs tend to resist by pulling in the opposite direction. To get the dog up and following, loosen the slack on the lead and encourage the dog to follow verbally or with food prompts. Once you have the dog successfully heeling in the yard with no distractions, you can proceed to the front yard and the street while there are still no distractions. With practice, strong motivators and the use of the head halter, the dog can then gradually be walked in the presence of stimuli that might otherwise cause lunging and forging, such as other dogs, cyclists, or children playing. A detailed description for teaching "steady" follows below:



Teaching Steady / Maintaining a Loose Leash (Note that this exercise can be done with either a head halter or a flat collar)

- While you are standing still in a location without distractions, give the dog three to four feet of the leash. If the leash remains loose, say "steady", and occasionally give the dog a food or social reward (positive reinforcement).
- If the dog starts to walk away, the "steady" command is given. If the dog remains at loose leash, then reward. If the dog gets to the end of the leash and starts to tug and pull against the leash, a "steady" command is given and is immediately followed by a slight tug on the leash by the owner to get the dog's attention and stop it. Then, slack is returned to the leash.
- Upon compliance (loose leash) immediately give a food or social reward.

- After several repetitions, the dog learns that it is rewarded for keeping the leash loose and the word steady means “move to a relaxed leash position”.
- Practice a couple of times a day in the home and yard with few distractions. As the dog gets better, gradually add distractions. Rewards should be given for maintaining a loose leash when walking by your side.
- The steady command can then be used to stop tugging and pulling on leash while walking and to achieve a settled and controlled heel.

Another solution is to use “no pull harnesses” (See our handout on ‘Behavior management products’). These devices fit around the dog’s body and around the forelegs so that when the dog forges ahead the forelegs and body can be controlled. Although these harnesses do not provide the level of control afforded by the head halter, compared to head halters, they require little or no training and do provide immediate control of pulling.

I have tried to teach my dog to walk nicely, but certain stimuli get him so agitated I cannot control him. What should I do?

Suggestions to control this behavior can be found in our handouts on ‘Aggression toward unfamiliar dogs’, ‘Territorial aggression’ and ‘Fear and panic – animals and people’. If the lunging and pulling behavior is accompanied by barking, growling, snarling, snapping or biting the situation is serious and needs professional intervention by a veterinary behaviorist.

*This client information sheet is based on material written by Debra Horwitz, DVM, Diplomate ACVB & Gary Landsberg, DVM, Diplomate ACVB
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