

Lesson 7: Teaching Your Dog to Heel



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If you've ever been taken for a walk by a strong, willful dog, you can't help but gaze in wistful admiration at people whose dogs walk calmly by their sides, even when off a leash.

But there's more to gain from teaching your dog to heel than no longer being dragged down the street. When walking your dog is not a "chore," you'll enjoy it more, you'll do it more, and you and your dog will both benefit from more frequent walks.

Teaching an energetic and always-curious dog to walk slowly by your side and ignore all the fascinating scents and other distractions during your outings will be a major challenge. After all, dogs, unlike people, do not naturally walk side-by-side with their friends and family.

Some dog trainers (amateurs and professionals alike) use various forms of choke collars, brute force, and intimidation to teach dogs to heel. From a dog's point of view, this concept of "heel" must seem more like "hell."

As you know by now, that's not how we operate. Teaching your dog to heel will be easier than you think when you make the lessons an interesting game. But it will take a little time; you may not get to a finished "heel" for a few weeks. That's OK, because the process will be lots of fun for you and your dog.

Follow our training system, and soon you and your dog will be the ones struggling dog walkers gaze at in wistful admiration!

Lesson 7: Teaching Your Dog to Heel

Read this lesson first, and then practice it with your dog.

1. Load up your pocket (or a bag or pouch) with treats.
2. Take your dog to a quiet area where it's safe for her to be off a leash.
3. Decide on which side you'll prefer your dog to heel—your left side or your right. It doesn't matter which side you choose, but once you decide, don't change your mind later and confuse your dog. For the purposes of this lesson, we'll use the left side. If you prefer the right side, just substitute "right" whenever we say "left."
4. Put a few treats in your left hand.
5. Show your dog the treats in your hand and then start walking away.
6. Encourage your dog to stay with you as you walk away. Call her name, slap your left leg, make smoochy noises, etc. Pick up the pace of your walking, almost as if you're trying to get away. As you're doing all this, wave the hand with the treats down low on your left side so your dog knows where they are.
7. If your dog follows you, stop after a few strides and give her the treats and lots of praise. It's great if she's stayed right by your side, but don't worry if she lags a bit behind at this point.
8. Wait a couple of minutes, and then repeat Steps 4 through 7. Vary your walking speed and make sudden changes in direction. The point is to make it interesting and fun for your dog to keep up with you.

If your dog doesn't do what you want

If your dog doesn't follow you, go back to her and put the treats right under her nose before walking away and encouraging her to follow.

If she still isn't interested, the treats are not tempting enough or she's too distracted. Find a treat she likes better, wait until she's hungrier, or move to a less-distracting location.

This Week's Homework

Practice this lesson a couple of times a day, but only for short periods of a minute or less.

Make sure there are few distractions, and your dog is eager to play and get lots of yummy treats.

In Addition to Practicing This Lesson...

- **Reinforce Lesson 6, Teaching Your Dog Not to Jump Up on People.** Vary the time of day and location. Make sure there are few distractions.

You'll need a helper to come in the door and ask your dog to "Sit," while you're ready with a treat and reward if she does so.

After a couple of successes, see if she'll sit automatically when your helper comes in, without giving the "Sit" command. If she does, give her lots of praise (but in a low, calm voice) and extra treats. If she doesn't, go back to practicing with the verbal command a couple of times, then try again without it.

Don't get frustrated if your dog has a hard time controlling her excitement and learning not to jump up on people. Some dogs learn this lesson quickly; others take a long time and a lot of practice.

Make sure you and your helper remain calm with body movements and tone of voice (even when giving praise). Remember, with this lesson it's very important to quell your dog's excitement, not encourage it.

Try to get visitors to ask your dog to sit every time they approach your dog. Be sure to have treats ready (and be sure your dog knows you have them). Don't bother trying this when your dog is overly excited.

Also practice coming in the door yourself. Have a treat ready, ask her to sit as soon as she approaches you, and give the rewards when she does so. Repeat this three or four times.

Practice giving the verbal praise ("Good") in a quiet tone of voice, with long, slow sounds rather than short, high-pitched tones.

Try to do two or three sessions a day, if possible.

- **Reinforce Lesson 5, Teaching Your Dog to Lie Down.** Vary the time of day and location. Make sure there are few distractions.

This week you want to work on getting your dog to lie down without pressing on

her back or tapping on the ground as encouragement.

Sit or squat down next to your dog. Ask her to lie down (“Rest”), followed by moving your hand (filled with a treat) down toward the ground. Do not tap the ground; do not press on her back.

If she lies down, immediately reward your dog with the treat and “Good!” praise. If she doesn’t lie down, try again, and make sure she knows about the treat in your hand. Use it as a lure under her nose, going down toward the ground.

After a couple of successes, ask her again to lie down but move your hand only partway to the ground, stopping a few inches above it. Praise and reward her correct response. Continue this for a few sessions, each time stopping your treat-filled hand a bit higher from the ground after giving the verbal command. (Don’t give her the treat until she lies all the way down.)

During sessions later in the week, ask her to lie down (“Rest”) while you are standing up. Make sure she knows the treat is in your hand, and lure her down with it, bending your knees and moving your hand as close to the ground as necessary for her to understand you want her to lie down. **Important:** Do not bend over at the waist toward your dog. This is too much body movement and your dog may think that’s part of the nonverbal command.

Practice asking your dog to lie down (“Rest”) from a standing position, sweeping your hand in a downward motion toward the ground as you bend your knees. During your sessions, gradually bend your knees less and stop your hand motion higher from the ground. Eventually, you’ll want her to respond to the verbal command while you’re standing up straight and just making the arm motion without moving the treat down to the ground.

Also this week, continue saying “Rest” just before your dog lies down on her own. Reward her as usual.

- **Reinforce Lesson 4, Teaching Your Dog to Stay.** Vary the time of day and location. Remember to use the same commands (“Stay,” “Free”) every time, using a low, quiet tone of voice.

Gradually increase the duration, distance and level of distraction as your dog responds well in her practice sessions, but work on only one of the “3 D’s” at a time.

Remember to emphasize the “Stay” with rewards, not the release (“Free”).

Lie Down/Stay

If your dog is responding well so far, ask your dog to **stay while lying down**. This is useful when you want your dog to stay put for more than a minute.

In a quiet room, when you are about two feet away from your dog, ask your dog to sit, then lie down (“Rest”). You want her lying down comfortably, with her hips flipped over to one side, rather than on her belly with her legs tucked underneath, ready to jump back up. If she doesn’t do so on her own, encourage her to lie with her hips flipped on their side by putting a treat in front of her nose and luring her head back toward her shoulder. This will help cause her to flop over onto her side. Give her the treat and quiet verbal praise; you don’t want her to get excited and get up.

Have another treat ready.

Try to be sure and stay two feet from her, so you’re not looming over her.

Tell her to “Stay” (make sure your tone of voice makes it a command, not a question), and hold your hand in the “stop sign” signal. After a few seconds, rock forward and with an underhanded motion, pop the treat into her mouth.

Be ready to “block” her with your body, as you learned last week, if she starts to get up.

After a couple of seconds, calmly give the release command (“Free”) and walk away. Remember, no praise or rewards after the release.

After a few minutes, repeat the lie down/stay exercise. Try for two or three short sessions a day.

- **Reinforce Lesson 3, Teaching Your Dog to Come when Called.** Continue teaching your dog to come when called at various times throughout the week. Practice in various locations (inside and out), at different times of the day.

Remember the priority is to teach her that coming to you is a wonderful thing that will make her very happy. Don’t use the come command when what you’ll do when she comes is something she won’t like.

If she’s responding well when you’re 30 feet away, try moving about 40 feet away from your dog before asking her to come. Be careful about what’s in the space between you and your dog. You don’t want distractions.

Don’t forget that coming when called is a difficult lesson for your dog to learn. Unlike sitting or lying down, it’s not based on something she naturally does on her own. Only advance the lessons (increase the distance) as she’s ready, remembering that all dogs learn at different paces. If she’s not ready for greater distance yet, don’t push it. Move closer and try again. Remember the excitement factor.

Resist the temptation to give the come command (“Come! Come! Come!”) more than once if your dog doesn’t immediately respond. Instead, go to your dog and show her the treat in your hand. Give the verbal command in an enthusiastic voice, turn and move away while clapping. Be sure to praise (“Good!”) as soon as she looks at you, and then reinforce generously with treats when she reaches you.

Even if she’s responding well, don’t start skimping on the treats just yet. Continue giving generous rewards.

- **Have fun playing with your dog!** Don’t focus all your time together on training. Spend lots of quality time just enjoying each other’s company.