

Teach Leash Walking to a Blind-Deaf Dog

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There are times when our dogs must be kept on leash to ensure their safety, and this becomes especially true when we have a dog that can't see or hear. The leash becomes not only a means of safety, but also a tool for communication. It's important that we introduce the leash the right way, so it becomes a useful tool for us and our dogs. We always want the leash to be a pleasant thing for our dogs.

Begin by teaching your dog that touching her collar is a good thing. Touch her neck lightly and then immediately feed her a treat. At first she may startle and turn to see who or what is touching her, but with repeated exposure, she should start to look forward to the treat coming when she feels you touch her neck. When she's comfortable with this step, begin to focus on lightly taking hold of her collar before you feed the treat. There's no need to hold tightly. You don't want to hold her in place, just curl your fingers slightly around it and then feed a treat. She should begin to enjoy you taking hold of her collar because it means something good is coming for her!

Some dogs may be able to go through these steps very quickly, but others may need more time spent on each step to become fully comfortable. Don't move on until your dog is comfortable with each step. You want your dog to love her leash and these are the first steps of that. Go as slowly as you need to.

Begin to hold your hand on her collar for slightly longer periods of time before giving the treat, working your way up to many seconds before rewarding. If she begins to struggle against your hand holding the collar, calmly let go and let her settle down. Then begin again, but at an easier step in the process.

The next step is to move your hand slightly on the collar to create some contact there against her neck, and then give the treat. Don't pull on the collar, just move it outward enough that you can feel some contact with it. Don't expect her to move, although she might, just get her used to there being some contact on the collar and that it leads to good things. Repeat this contact in all directions – left, right, up and down.

As your dog starts to accept this easily, begin to maintain the contact in one direction for a bit longer until she takes a very small step to come along with the collar contact. When you feel her come towards the contact, even slightly, immediately release the collar so it is hanging loosely (an additional reward for her) and feed a treat.

Build this up slowly until you can lead her two steps with the collar, then 4, etc. Don't give in to the temptation to pull your dog along where you want her to go. If you start to pull her, you will see resistance and you will be creating stress for your dog surrounding walking on a leash. Remember, she can't see where you are taking her and what is in her path. You are merely giving a collar contact signal to tell her you'd like her to walk in that direction with you. Let her make the choice on her own to trust and to come with you.

Of course, your dog's trust does come with some added responsibility on your part. Always be aware of where you are leading your dog so that nothing will scare her. Don't run her into anything. Don't lose that trust.

Once you can lead your dog easily with her collar, it's now time to attach the leash. A leash is not for pulling a dog around. It is for safety and to use as a communication tool. By putting a leash on our dogs,

we limit their options for acting in ways that dogs would normally act. Sometimes people use a leash as an excuse to require their dogs to be on their agenda. I see people use a leash to pull dogs closer to things that scare them than they would normally go on their own. Dogs are often expected to deal with being wherever people want them to be. To many dogs, being on a leash creates stress and anxiety because they are unable to act in ways that are comfortable and safe for them. Make sure the leash stays something positive for your dog!

When you first put the leash on your dog, just let her feel the weight of it. Don't go anywhere. Let her sniff it and then just sit and hang out together. Feed her treats, pet her, and relax together so she learns that the extra weight is a good thing. When you can attach the leash and your dog shows no concern, start leading her by the collar again. This is a behavior she knows and is comfortable with, just with the added aspect of the leash being attached. Feed lots of treats and pet her a lot to keep this fun for her.

By gradually sliding your hand from holding the collar to the leash snap, you will begin to lead her with gentle contact on the leash instead of the collar. Contact on the leash feels a bit different than from the collar, but she's already learned to come towards the direction of contact. Move your hand gradually up the leash in several sessions so she can adjust to the changes in how the contact feels. Again, let it be her choice to walk with you. Don't force her with the leash. You can progress to sliding your hand more and more up the leash until you can stand up and lead her gently with the whole leash.

This is the process I use for teaching any dog to walk on a leash, but I go a step further with a blind and deaf dog. You can teach your dog different signals using the leash that will help you communicate with her. Practice keeping a very gentle contact on the leash as you lead your dog. With this contact, she will learn whether you are turning, stopping, and even how fast you're going. If you stop to let her sniff and then you decide you'd like to move along, a wiggle of the leash can be her signal to pay attention, you're moving along now. You've already taught her to go in the direction of the contact, so holding contact to one side or the other will signal which direction you're turning, and gentle contact straight up can signal a stop.

If your dog wants to go one way and you want to go another, simply stop and hold that gentle contact until she comes back towards you. You've already taught her to come towards the contact, so you won't need to pull or yank on her, just hold that contact and let her make the choice to come back to you. Don't forget to practice in new areas and with various obstacles. Watch out for obstacles in advance. You will get better at this as you learn what things need to be watched out for – curbs, low branches sticking out on bushes, fire hydrants, etc.

Walking together will take practice on both of your parts. You will need to learn how to be an effective leader, while communicating with the leash. Your dog will need to learn to be alert for cues even with other distractions going on. Be patient with the process. Soon it will become habit and your walks together will flow.

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