

Should you teach your dog to heel?

Over the years I've had many dog owners ask me to teach their dog to heel, defined as walking right by the owner's side on a walk. With the exception of service dogs, and dogs in training for other purposes, I often wonder why this is so important to some dog owners.

I can list some reasons for why a dog should learn to walk next to his owner for short periods of time. Some dogs bark, and lunge, at other dogs or people who walk near them. Under this circumstance I will definitely help the client train the dog to walk by his or her side, but I also explain that it's not necessary for the entire walk. Heeling, and more importantly refocusing your dog's attention onto you, will help avoid an unwanted incident because you will have more control over him. Your dog may be *perceiving* the passerby or dog as a threat, even though there is no actual threat. Once the perceived threat has passed and is out of sight, your dog should relax and you can carry on with a leisurely walk.

Some clients explain to me that they want their dog to heel because he's pulls on leash, making the walk very difficult, not to mention unpleasant. This may cause us to stop walking our dog as often as we should. These dogs may even bolt in the direction of a squirrel. You certainly don't want your dog running across the street chasing after a squirrel, nor do you want to be dragged across the street because you refuse to let go of his leash. In this case, teaching proper leash manners is in order, and often times involves a quick fix such as changing the dog's walking equipment. Again I explain that it's not necessary for the dog to maintain a heel position for the entire walk.

Other clients have read that dogs that walk ahead of their owner, or even behind, are trying to be the "alpha" dog or "dominate" them so their dogs *must* learn to walk right next to them. The concept of "dominance" status is an article in and of itself, so I'll save it for another time. In the meantime, trust me when I say pulling on leash has absolutely nothing to do with dominance.

Lastly, I find it important to explain why most dogs walk ahead of us, or even lag behind us, making it difficult, and typically unnecessary, for them to remain right by our side. Dogs have about 220 million scent receptors in their nose, compared to 5 million in humans. That means that our dogs are picking up on smells that will never make it to human brain regions responsible for sense of smell. There's so much to explore, so they'll either lag behind or pull ahead to take it all in. I don't particularly appreciate the occasional pulling by my dog, however I can certainly understand why it's happening. That said, when I need him to stick close to me he responds very well to "with me," and of course to the treats I always carry with me on walks.

So should you teach your dog to heel? I definitely believe that teaching your dog to walk next to you is a valuable skill to be used as needed. Training loose-leash walking, as well, makes for a much more enjoyable walk for all involved.

ARF's dog trainer Matthew Posnick offers an excellent basic obedience class to teach heel, loose-leash walking, as well as many other basic obedience skills.

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