

Training Your Dog To Be the Perfect Walking Partner

Do you dread taking your dog for a walk? Whether your dog is still a pup or fully grown, there are steps you can take to help your pet become the perfect walking partner. Be aware of this mistake that many owners unknowingly make and 10 reasons why I recommend avoiding this popular type of leash.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- The purpose of using a leash to walk a dog is to keep the animal safe and under the owner's control, and retractable leashes often do the opposite
- On a retractable leash, your dog can get far enough away from you to either get into trouble or into harm's way; in addition, retractable leashes are responsible for many injuries to both dogs and dog walkers
- The very nature of retractable leashes trains dogs to pull on the leash to extend the lead
- The most important thing you can do to set the stage for a lifetime of enjoyable walks is to help your canine family member learn to be the perfect walking partner
- Dogs who are enjoyable to walk with have learned that loose leads are good, taut leads are not, and pulling against the lead is pointless

A retractable leash is not so much a leash as it is a length of thin cord wound around a spring-loaded device housed inside a plastic handle. The handles of most retractable leashes are designed to fit comfortably in a human hand. A button on the handle controls how much of the cord is extended.

Retractable leashes are popular primarily because they aren't as confining as regular leashes, allowing dogs more freedom to sniff and poke around on walks. But unfortunately, there are many downsides to this type of leash.

10 Reasons Not to Use a Retractable Leash

1. The length of retractable leashes, some of which can extend up to 26 feet, allows dogs to get far enough away from their humans that a situation can quickly turn dangerous. A dog on a retractable leash is often able to run into the middle of the street, for example, or make uninvited contact with other dogs or people.
2. In the above scenario, or one in which your pet is being approached by an aggressive dog, it is nearly impossible to get control of the situation if the need arises. It's much easier to regain control of — or protect — a dog at the end of a 6-foot standard flat leash than it is if he's 20 or so feet away at the end of what amounts to a thin string.
3. The thin cord of a retractable leash can break, especially when a powerful dog is on the other end of it. If a strong, good-sized dog takes off at full speed, the cord can snap. Not only can this put the dog and whatever he may be chasing in danger, but the cord can also snap back and injure the human at the other end.
4. If a dog walker gets tangled up in the cord of a retractable leash or grabs it in an attempt to reel in their dog, it can result in burns, cuts, and even amputation. In addition, many people have been pulled right off their feet

by a dog that reaches the end of the leash and keeps going. This can result in bruises, "road rash," broken bones, and worse.

5. Dogs have also received terrible injuries as a result of the sudden jerk on their neck that occurs when they run out the leash, including neck wounds, lacerated tracheas, and injuries to the spine.
6. Retractable leashes allow dogs more freedom to pull at the end of them, which can look like aggression to another dog who may decide to "fight back."
7. The handles of retractable leashes are bulky and can be easily pulled out of human hands, resulting in a runaway dog.
8. Along those same lines, many dogs, especially fearful ones, are terrorized by the sound of a dropped retractable leash handle and may take off running, which is dangerous enough. To make matters worse, the object of the poor dog's fear is then "chasing" her, and if the leash is retracting as she runs, the handle is gaining ground on her — she can't escape it. Even if this scenario ultimately ends without physical harm to the dog (or anyone else), it can create lingering fear in the dog not only of leashes, but also of being walked.
9. Retractable leashes, like most retractable devices, tend to malfunction over time, either refusing to extend, refusing to retract, or unspooling at will.
10. Retractable leashes are an especially bad idea for dogs who haven't been trained to walk politely on a regular leash. By their very nature, they train dogs to pull while on leash, because they learn that pulling extends the lead.

If your dog is well trained with good manners, and smart enough to master a regular leash and a retractable leash without being confused, you could be one of the rare guardians who can walk your canine companion on any kind of leash without increasing risks to either one of you.

Setting the Stage for a Lifetime of Good Walks

If you're one of the many dog parents who dreads walks not due to a retractable leash, but because your dog actually walks you or exhibits other bad leash manners, the following information will hopefully be helpful.

Needless to say, the best way to develop a positive dog walking habit is when your pet is a **puppy**. In fact, as soon as her immune system is strong enough to protect her from communicable disease (discuss when it's safe to take her on adventures with your integrative veterinarian), she's ready for walks with you or other family members. She should already have her own secure-fitting flat collar (no choke or pinch collars, please) and ID tag, and she should be accustomed to wearing it before you attempt to take her for walks.

Some puppies have no problem wearing a collar; others do. If yours is fighting it, as long as you're sure it isn't too tight (you should be able to easily slip your fingers under it) or uncomfortable for some other reason, distract her from fussing with it until she gets used to it. It shouldn't take more than a couple of days for her to forget she's even wearing it.

If you plan to use a head halter or harness for walks (which I recommend for any dog at risk of injury from pulling against a collar/leash combination), again, get your puppy comfortable wearing it. As with the collar, this needs to happen before you attempt to attach a leash and head out the door.

Once wearing her collar and a halter or harness is second nature to your dog, you're ready for the next step. Attach about four feet of light line to the collar or harness — cotton awning cord or light cotton rope will do — and let puppy drag it around the house under your watchful eye. She'll get used to it being attached, as well as the tug of it when she steps on it, or it hangs up on something.

Once she's used to the 4-foot line, move to a 10 to 15-foot line of the same material and head outside.

Training Your Dog to Follow on a Loose Lead

Initial walks should be short for most puppies — the main goal is to get your dog used to being attached to you by a lead. Find a safe environment and allow puppy to drag the line behind him for a bit, then pick up the opposite end. Let him lead you around for a few seconds while you hold the line just off the ground. Slow down so he's forced to slow down, ultimately to a stop. Take a short break for praise and a little **playtime**.

Next, let him trail the line again, but when you pick up your end this time, call him and stand still. If he pulls, hold your ground without pulling him in your direction. The goal is to teach him to put slack in the line himself by moving toward you. When he puts slack in the line, praise him and call him to you.

If he comes all the way to you, give him more praise and a **training treat**. If he stops on his way to you, tighten the line just enough to apply a tiny bit of pull to it. Immediately call him to come again. Give praise as he moves toward you and treats when he comes all the way back. Two or three repetitions is all many puppies need to understand lack of tension in the line is what earns praise and treats.

When your pup has learned to come towards you to relieve tension on the line, you can begin backing up as he comes toward you to keep him moving. Next, turn and walk forward so he's following you. If he passes you, head in another direction so he's again behind you.

The goal is to teach him to follow on a loose lead. Once you've accomplished the goal, you can continue to use the light line or replace it with a leash.

Depending on your pup's temperament, 5 to 15-minute sessions are sufficient in the beginning. Practice controlling him on the lead for 30 second intervals during each session. Exercise patience and don't engage in a battle of wills with your pup. Don't snap, yank, or otherwise use the line for correction or punishment. Stop before either of you gets frustrated or tired.

After each short session on the lead, liberally praise your puppy and spend a few minutes playing fetch or some other game he loves. Remember: you're building the foundation for an activity both you and he will enjoy and look forward to throughout his life.

Reducing Your Dog's Urge to Pull

If your little guy or girl just doesn't seem to be catching on to the loose lead thing, don't despair. Some puppies and untrained adult dogs stubbornly fight the pressure of the line rather than create slack.

If your puppy freezes on a taut line or consistently pulls against it, it's important to use a halter or harness rather than a collar attached to the lead, because she can create serious neck and cervical disk problems for herself by pulling against a collar/leash combination.

Next, make sure you're not part of the problem. Our human instinct is to hold the leash taut, so you must also train yourself to move in ways that keep slack in the line. A dog's natural response to a tight line is to pull against it. Once you're sure you're not contributing to your pup's refusal to create slack in the lead or move toward you, do the following:

- Maintain tension on the line and turn your back to her. Allow time for it to occur to her she can't win by pulling against you.
- Remain still with your back to her holding the tension in the line — don't jerk it, don't pull, or yank her toward you, and don't put slack in the line yourself, as this will show her that the way to get slack is to pull at the line, which is exactly the opposite of what you're trying to teach her.

The message you want to send to your pup is that pulling on the lead doesn't accomplish a thing. It doesn't change the scenery, it doesn't get you moving in a direction she chooses, and it doesn't earn **praise** or treats. Eventually, she'll stop doing what doesn't work, especially when she's consistently rewarded for desirable behavior.

From the very first moment you begin leash training, make sure your puppy accomplishes nothing by pulling on her line. It takes some dogs longer than others to learn to keep the leash loose, but with patience and persistence, any puppy can learn to follow on a loose lead.
