

TALES FROM A DOG BEHAVIOURIST:

The Walk!

There is ample scientific evidence to show that interacting positively with a dog is good for both mental and physical health, and there is no better way to interact with your dog than taking them for a walk. If your dog could choose between treats, cuddles, and general spoiling, and going for a walk – they'd choose the walk. Walking with your dog is one of the most potent ways of forming a strong bond, and also has numerous other benefits for your relationship.

Wolves are walkers. They are built for stamina rather than speed, and migrate long distances in search of prey. Your dog is not much different. They have a natural instinct to migrate, and taking them for a walk is the best way of tapping into this primal need. In wolf culture, the general routine is: walk, eat, rest. If you want a calm dog, take them for a walk before you feed them and they will be more inclined to relax.

Some dogs of course, are not easy to walk. They pull, they want to rush after other dogs, they try and wriggle out of their collar, etc etc... The walking process starts at home. Get your dog's leash and call them to you – do not chase after them. Once they have come to you, ask them to sit and only put on the leash once they have done so. Don't allow them to rush out of the door or gate first; you pass through all boundaries first as is appropriate for a pack leader. The leash should be short enough to keep the dog at your side, but long enough for it to be loose. A tense leash makes for a tense dog that is more likely to get overexcited or aggressive. If they pull, give a tug on the leash to the side, never backwards. When you pull a dog backwards, you're encouraging them to resist and pull even more, but tugging them to the side puts them off balance and gets their attention back on you. Once you've done this, immediately slacken the leash. The slack leash is the reward. Lastly, finish the walk exactly as you started it – go back to where you put the leash on, and again ask your dog to sit, and then remove the leash. The walk thus goes full circle, and tells your dog that you will see things through to the end. This is an easy way of gaining their respect, and also enhances discipline. Remember, it's your walk, you decide how it goes.

These are just general guidelines, and if your dog is a real nightmare on walks, ask a trainer or behaviourist for help.

Walking on the leash and walking free in a park should not be equated. Walking on-leash enforces discipline, enhances your role as pack leader, and gives your dog a job, namely following you in a controlled manner. Off-leash walking in a park is a reward. This is fantastic, for both you and your dog – you get to relax, they get far more exercise. But only walk your dog off leash if they are well-socialised and will return to you if called. Also, begin your park walk with a short on-leash walk, so that discipline comes before the reward.

I cannot emphasize enough how important walking your dog is, for them, you and your relationship. Walking should be a part of your daily routine, and if you're busy, even a 5 minute walk has its benefits. Many behavioural problems can be lessened or even eliminated by making this simple addition to your daily life. This is the best advice I can give any dog owner – go and walk your dog.

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