

To Walk ... Or Not to Walk? **THAT IS THE CHALLENGE.**

By Teoti Anderson, A Dog's Best Friend

You can't avoid it any longer. You're at THAT house. With THAT dog. You heave a sigh and open the door. You can check the house, feed a meal, refill the water bowl, bring in the mail, even water the plants. There's nothing left to stall ... putting on the leash.

What's it going to be?

Duke the Dragger: This dog thinks he's training for the Iditarod. Have you stretched and done your warmups? Iced your biceps? Alerted the surgeon who specializes in rotator cuffs? Get ready to bolt down the street like Duke's running from a crime scene.

Betty the Balker: Betty doesn't want to leave. She doesn't care that her parents left strict instructions for daily walks; she's not leaving the yard. Don't bother sweet-talking her, or waving treats around; she's not budging. Sometimes, she'll give you false hope and start walking, only to put on the brakes later. You may be on a tight schedule, but Betty has her own timeline.

What do you do when you have a clear definition of "walk" in your head, but the dog you're taking care of is coming up with new interpretations?

Why Dogs Pull

Pulling on leash is not a dominance attempt. Dogs are not trying to dominate you by demonstrating how slow you are; they just want to explore. They have four legs ready to roll, and you're just slowing them down. Pulling is fun, and if it's allowed, it gets them what they want.

Dogs pull mainly because the behavior has been rewarded. Any time you let a dog pull you to the grass and he relieves himself, you're rewarding pulling. He feels better after he's peed or pooped, so it's a reward.

Any time a dog pulls you on leash to greet a person or another dog, you're rewarding pulling. He wanted to see the other dog, he pulled you to get there, and he got what he wanted. Behavior that is rewarded is repeated.

Want a textbook example? Park outside a dog park and watch how many pet parents let their dogs drag them on leash all the way into the park, where the dogs are rewarded with freedom, dog buddies, and sniffing galore. These same pet parents often complain their dogs pull them during walks. Dogs don't understand that sometimes it's okay to pull and sometimes it isn't. Letting them pull for some things and then getting mad at them at other times is inconsistent and confusing.

What To Do

You are the devoted pet sitter. It's not your job to train the dog (unless you also offer training as a service). You often aren't with them long enough each time to make a big dent in bad behavior.

There are things you can do, however, to make your visits easier and safer:

- First, make sure you're not accidentally contributing to the unwanted behavior. Do you find yourself letting a dog drag you where he wants to go? If that's the case, he won't ever change.
- Talk with the pet parent. Encourage them to start reward-based training with their dog for their own safety and yours.
- Learn about leash safety. Never wrap a leash around your wrist. If a dog bolts unexpectedly, he could break your wrist. Instead, hang the handle loop over your thumb and grip the leash with your hand. Ladies, hold the leash at your belly button. Women are stronger at their cores, so holding the leash at your belly button is going to give you a safer, more stable grip.
- If the dog pulls, stop. Don't say anything and don't move. If the dog comes back toward you and there is slack in the leash, praise him and start moving. Alternatively, if he won't stop pulling, turn and go the opposite direction. Do this every time he pulls and the leash is tight. A mile-long walk is still a mile if it's back and forth in front of the house!

Front-clip harness: If you take a typical harness and clip the leash over the dog's shoulder blades, you make it easier for the dog to pull you. Instead, clipping the leash to the dog's chest gives you more leverage and makes the dog easier to maneuver.

Head halter: These are for severe pullers, but you can't just put one on and take off walking. You need to acclimate the dog to the head halter, which is a better job for the pet parent since it will take time. If you control the dog's head, you can better control the dog, which is why head halters can be very effective. Unlike prong collars or choke chains, head halters do not put any pressure on the dog's trachea.

Why Dogs Refuse to Walk

Sometimes, a dog will put on the brakes because he's eating something dead on the side of the road or sniffing a particularly interesting clump of grass. If he's simply distracted, giving him a simple encouraging word or gentle tug on the leash will usually get him moving again.

Have you ever seen a dog just ... stop? He's not distracted; he's not sniffing. This dog is not being stubborn. He's usually afraid.

Dogs that balk on walks, especially puppies, are often afraid. Many don't want to leave the safety of their yards and will pull to get home. They are often labeled "stubborn" when they really are terrified.

What is frightening them? It can be anything they are seeing or hearing. A kid on a bike. Another dog. A dog barking from inside a house that they cannot see. An airplane. Puppies less than 12 weeks are in their critical socialization period and will often just stop moving while they determine if something is a friend or foe.

What To Do

Have delicious, tempting treats with you. If your dog client balks on a walk, don't talk to him. Don't beg him to move and don't bribe him with a treat. Instead, go as far away from him as the leash will allow, and turn slightly away from him. Keep tension in the leash but don't pull him. Now, ignore him. You can peek out of the corner of your eye, but don't engage with him. If you do, you'll be rewarding the balking behavior. Instead, just wait.

The second he moves, praise him and give him a treat by your side, so he has to come to you to get the treat. This is rewarding the moving behavior, which is what you want. Take your time. A frightened dog will not react well to you getting angry or frustrated with him.

With patience and a little insight, you'll have Duke the Dragger and Betty the Balker walking with you sweet as pie. ■



With more than 26 years of professional dog training experience, Teoti is the author

of *The Dog Behavior Problem Solver*, *The Ultimate Guide to Dog Training, Puppy Care and Training*, *Quick and Easy Crate Training* and more. She currently resides in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, and serves as vice president of A Dog's Best Friend, the first dog training company to use positive reinforcement training in South Florida.