

A BATTLE OF WILLS: TO LEASH OR NOT TO LEASH



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Most dogs quickly develop an emotional response to the leash being clipped on. At home it is usually a happy emotion as it predicts a walk, but outside it can turn into a different story.

Your dog has just had a nice off-leash time running around in the park, and it is time to go home. You are approaching the spot where you usually leash up your dog or you are trying to catch him from play. You may be in a hurry to get back home, but your dog is onto you! He knows that the fun is about to end and a leash means boredom or frustration.

It is as if the moment you are even thinking about putting the leash on, your dog starts showing a lot of avoidance; she doesn't respond to you anymore or turns the situation into a fun (for her!) catch-me-if-you-can game. When you finally manage to get close enough, she may growl and try to nip at you while you are doing your best to clip the leash on as fast as you can.

Finally you get the leash on, but the game may not be won yet! Have you ever been in a situation where the dog will start biting and tugging on the leash, jumping up on you, demand barking, and nipping you? Not a fun scenario! And if you have ever experienced it, you already know that getting angry does not help.

Change the emotional association

The first step is to change your dog's emotional association to the whole event. Do leash-up training inside the house. Every time you put the leash on, give your dog a treat. After several repetitions, your dog will realize that the leash coming on is a good thing. You can also give him a treat when the leash comes off, which will make your dog stay with you until released instead of immediately taking off.

Then take the training outside. When your dog is off-leash, start working on your recall like crazy. Always use your recall a lot when you don't actually need it. Every single time reward your dog generously with tasty treats. A pat on the head is something that most dogs don't really like, and even for those who do, it tends to be a huge disappointment, so keep the treats flowing.

Then start incorporating leashing up into the recall training. Every second or third time when you recall your dog, after you reward her, put the leash on and then take it immediately off again. Your dog will learn that the leash coming on doesn't necessarily mean that the freedom ends, and she will happily allow herself to be leashed.

Break the pattern

Of course, you finally need to take off with your dog on his leash. But walking on leash should be lots of fun for both of you, not a battle of wills! By now your dog should be happy about you clipping the leash on because it means treats and release back to freedom.

The next step is to start working on rewarding your dog for loose leash



walking or heeling. When the leash is on, reward your dog for every step that she walks nicely with you. If you find this a struggle with the treats and the leash, get in touch with a trainer who can help you with the process.

Start in a place where you can still let your dog off his leash, and then after your little practice walk, let your dog off his leash again. Be unpredictable so that he never knows when you will let him go again and when you are actually going back home.

The more you practice the leash walking the more fluent it will become, and then walking away from the park on leash will actually become something that your dog anticipates rather than dreads. The key to success is to systematically incorporate this into your everyday routine so that it becomes a habit for both of you.