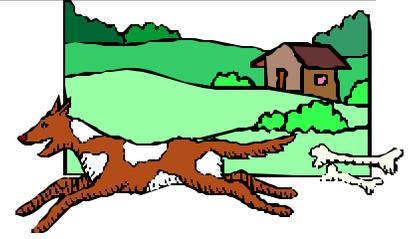




# Behavior and Training Department Tips and Techniques

## Trailiquette Canine Courtesy Off-leash



Dogs and leashes do not go together naturally, any more than children and leashes do (can you imagine what that would be like?). Dogs often strain and pull against the restraint of the leash, sometimes literally taking their owners for a walk, other times getting so frustrated they bark at anything walking, running or rolling by. Of course, with most dogs, if the owner let go of the leash, it would be like letting go of a coiled spring! So, lots of training is needed.

There are real advantages to walking dogs off-leash - increased exercise and mental stimulation and, of course, fun for both dog and owner. From a behavioral standpoint, off-leash walking is also a good idea, since leashes often exacerbate poor behavior, including certain kinds of aggression. However, just because a dog is off-leash doesn't mean that the dog doesn't have to be well-behaved and well-trained.

Some dogs that walk on the trails with their owners are very, very friendly, and would just love to meet anything moving. These dogs are usually young, inquisitive, trusting, and occasionally pretty rough. They no sooner see a stranger walking along a trail than they rush up, tail wagging, dirty paws at the ready to jump up and greet. Owners of these dogs often call out cheerfully, "Don't worry, he's friendly!" not thinking that perhaps all that boundless energy isn't what the other person had in mind. Sometimes the other human is NOT friendly, and sometimes the other dog is NOT friendly. And, everyone has the right to walk the trails, whether they like dogs or not.

The most important exercises for you to teach your dog if you're planning on taking advantage of off-leash walking are the Recall (Come), Wait, Leave It and something we call "Mother May I." The Recall is obvious – call your dog, and she comes to you right away. Wait is important because sometimes you want your dog to stop and wait for you to catch up (as in blind curves), and Leave It is important because of those unsavory (but apparently tasty) goodies by the side of the road. We'll discuss the Recall in this handout, and how it can be used to teach your dog some canine courtesy.

To teach your dog trailiquette, you should start by making yourself much more interesting than the surrounding countryside. That's a tall order. It takes a canny knowledge of doggy desires – predominantly making sure she's extraordinarily hungry when you start on your walk, and that you have something extraordinarily delicious to fill the need. This will be breakfast or dinner during the time you're training her, but you should know that normal old kibble rarely keeps any dog's interest – certainly not as well as fresh food. The treats should be delicious and nutritionally good (you'll be using a lot for awhile). You can also use a ball, or other toy, if your dog is very attached to it.

It helps if you can find a trail that's not very busy for the first few sessions, or go during off-hours, so as not to meet too many distractions.

Attach a 20 to 30 foot leash (long-line) to your dog, and just let it drag. It's a good idea to tie a knot in the line every few feet. This is for you to step on in emergencies.

Start walking. Every minute or so, call your dog's name, and when she turns to look at you, praise her enthusiastically and give her a treat. Make her come to you for the goodie, rather than going to her. Release her so she can explore for a short time, and then she should come to you. She'll get the idea pretty quickly! As soon as she is coming every time, you can add the "Come" cue. When she's coming to you VERY reliably, you can reduce the number of treats she gets; maybe, one every two to three times she comes. But, plan on taking treats with you for the foreseeable future – you still have to maintain your attraction to your dog, even when her behavior gets more reliable. After all, how would you like your salary to be reduced once you know how to do your job well!



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Back to the exercise. If you call her name, and she doesn't come, tell her, "Uh uh," and step on the long-line. Don't pick it up – at least not yet; if you step on it, she'll think the ground stopped her – not you. Call her again, and reward her if she comes (I know, you don't feel like she did it willingly, but she did it, and the reward needs to come at this stage). If she still doesn't come, pick up the long line and give it a couple of tugs, while moving backward. Drop it as soon as she starts coming to you – you don't want her to think you're reeling her in - that defeats the whole purpose of the exercise.

At some point during the teaching of this behavior, you'll want to add a sit to the recall. Just call her, and when she comes, ask her to sit and wait for her to do so. When she sits, praise and reward her.

Now we're ready to teach her how to behave when distractions appear on the trail. You start with easy stuff – as she trots purposefully towards something moderately interesting on the trail, call her, have her sit, reward her, then, release her – let her go to the interesting object. (This is very "Zen." In order to investigate the attractive object, she must give it up first). Do that again and again, increasing the level of distractions. Make sure your foot is ready to step on the long-line! If you don't feel like you can step on the line quickly enough, you can tie the long-line around your waist; just make sure most of it is dragging on the ground. The dog should feel NO pressure from the leash.

Once you feel like her recall is getting more reliable, go to a trail that has more traffic on it, but isn't overwhelmingly busy, or – better yet - bribe a friend to hide on the trail and walk towards you on your cue. Do your exercise again and again – your friend should first walk, then jog, then – if he or she has a bicycle – ride by. Each time your friend approaches, the dog should come to you for a treat. This isn't the time to be stingy with the food – you are practicing a behavior that will be invaluable later on!

Why do all this with a long-line rather than a regular leash? Well, first of all, regular leashes are short, and the dog can always feel it, so she understands that when it's on, she must perform certain behaviors and when it's off, she can go her merry way. Secondly, taut leashes can cause frustration, and frustration can cause what we call leash aggression – that is, the dog acts aggressive only when she's on a leash, never at other times. And thirdly, we're interested in getting a recall from a long distance away; you must make her think she CAN go far away!

When do you use this exercise? Whenever you see ANYONE on the trail – people, dogs, bikes, deer (!)... or anything enticing you don't want her to have – horse manure is a good example. If she comes to you when she sees another dog or person, and waits for you to release her to go visit when you wish to, you've taught her an extraordinarily important behavior – "Mother May I." You're also being a very responsible dog owner. And, not least, people will think you're a great dog trainer and that you have a great dog!



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Here's a sample of what good dog to dog body language looks like:

Both dogs are off-leash. They see each other around the same time, and both dogs slow down, perhaps even briefly stop. They look at the other dog, and then begin to walk slowly towards each other. The pace is not hesitant, just measured. As they approach one another, each dog begins to arc slightly away from the other dog until they're almost past each other – at no time do they hold eye contact. If everything looks okay, they'll sniff at each other's ano-genital region, then work their way back to the heads again, if necessary.

After this, sometimes the dogs will play; more often, they'll just go on their way.

Here's a sample of poor dog body language:

The dogs see each other, and one races happily towards the other, with nothing but fun and games in mind. When he gets to the other dog, he stops just in time to miss careening into her. Or, maybe his judgment is off, and he DOES run into her. The second dog has no idea what to make of this behavior, and may cringe and try to run away, or may snarl and/or snap. This is how dog communication can turn into dog-to-dog aggression. It doesn't matter that the first dog was just being friendly – his behavior was out of line, and unacceptable in the dog world.

In a world without human intervention, the rudeness of the young dog would have been eliminated when he was a puppy – the first time he tried that on an adult dog. It wouldn't have taken much, just a sharp bark and an air-bite to tell him to watch his manners. However, most owners and many breeders won't allow their adult dogs to discipline pups, and so the youngsters never learn what is acceptable in polite society. It's a job that should be taken seriously.

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