



HUMANE SOCIETY OF BROWARD COUNTY

Intermediate Obedience for Dogs

Handout #3

Straight Line Heeling

The heel cue differs greatly from the loose leash walking your dog learned in basic obedience. Heel is intended for short term use when you need extra control over your dog such as crossing the street, moving around people or objects or avoiding dangerous situations. Heel should not be the primary cue used for your afternoon walk around the park. This cue requires getting your dog's attention and holding his attention to properly and safely navigate him when needed. This particular behavior is a difficult skill for your dog to master; you must be patient and allow your dog to learn this skill step by step. Short frequent sessions will be more beneficial to learning than long periods of training. Practice for 5 minutes at a time at least 5 times a day. This behavior will require a lot of concentration on your dog's part and a lot of consistency from you. Start out slowly and set your dog up for success.

The heel position is on your left side with your dog very close to you, but not touching. His nose should not fall behind your knee and his shoulder should not pass in front of your knee. A good heel will look as if your dog is attached to you by some invisible magnetic field and he moves smoothly with you no matter what direction you go. During training your right hand should hold the lead at waist level in front of you and your left hand should loosely grasp the lead and hold it taught (do not let extra leash dangle). As a finished product an appropriate heel would only require the use of your right hand to hold the leash in front of you.

This cue can be taught off lead or on. If you have a safe enclosed place to practice off lead this will be the best way to begin. You do not want to develop the habit of using the leash as a physical prompt by constantly pulling your dog into the correct position

- Begin with your dog at your left side.
- Have a few food treats in your left hand. Hold your hand at waist level.
- Say your dog's name (get his attention, eye contact) and take two steps forward.
- If your dog moves with you say "good dog" to mark the correct behavior and deliver a food reward.
- If your dog hesitates encourage him by patting your leg and using a happy voice, to say his name. Be interesting and upbeat so he wants to come with you.
- Do not be overly concerned with perfect heel position at this time. Once your dog gets the idea of the exercise you can work on fine tuning placement as he gets better at keeping his attention on you and is consistently following your movements.
- Repeat the exercise. Say dog's name = take two steps = dog moves = "good dog" deliver food reward.
- When two steps become easy for your dog increases your distance (4 steps) and repeat exercise.

- If your dog lags behind or pulls ahead use a negative verbal marker such as “wrong” or “try again” and start over.
- Once your dog can reliably maintain a heel position for 10 steps add the verbal cue “Heel”. “Buster, heel” and proceed with exercise.
- Begin to fine tune the heel position once you introduce the verbal cue and only reward good positioning. Be patient this cue takes time.

Heel Tips

- ✓ Once you get the basics down start to incorporate other variables into the behavior.
- ✓ Right and left turns.
- ✓ About turns or U turns.
- ✓ Train in a new location.
- ✓ Vary your speed. Practice slow speed, fast speed and stopping.
- ✓ Remember, duration, distraction and distance needs to be part of proofing the heel cue.

Variable Reinforcement

The use of positive reinforcement training requires that in the learning stages of a new behavior your dog must receive constant and frequent reinforcement. Food rewards are most commonly used in this type of training. It is important to recognize when your dog has made enough progress in his training and can accomplish cues easily and reliably. At this point in your dog’s training you should not be using a food reward for reinforcing a “Sit” every time or even that often. Variable reinforcement has two primary components:

- Variable Ratio (VR) – Reinforcement is delivered only after a random number of correct responses. You determine at what number of responses you will reinforce.
Ex: VR3 = Dog is reinforced after three correct responses.
- Variable Interval (VI) – Reinforce first correct response after a random amount of time has passed since last reinforcement. You determine what length of time between reinforcement.
Ex: VI15 = Dog is reinforced for his first correct response after an average of fifteen seconds has passed since his last reinforcement.

Variable Reinforcement Tips

- ✓ For our purposes we will be concentrating on a variable ratio during training. Ratio schedules are more resistant to extinction than an interval schedule and will produce a higher rate of response. Think of ratio as an amount and interval as a period of time.
- ✓ Variable reinforcement schedules offer a stronger trained response and will support the behavior longer (resisting extinction); also known as Partial Reinforcement Extinction Effect or PREE.
- ✓ When altering your reinforcement schedule go slow and allow your dog to adjust to the new system. If you push your dog too fast or too hard you could see ratio strain and behaviors may break down.