

Intro to Rally

TEACHING YOUR DOG TO HEEL

AKC definition of heel position in its Obedience Regulations:

"The dog should be at the handler's left side straight in line with the direction the handler is facing. The area from the dog's head to shoulder is to be in line with the handler's left hip. The dog should be close to, but not crowding, its handler so that the handler has freedom of motion at all times."

There are various ways of teaching your dog to heel. Luring is probably the fastest way to get your dog into correct heel position. Use a visible food lure (something REALLY attractive to your dog) like a magnet on his nose to show him exactly where you want him to be. Keep the food in your left hand, directly above his nose and close to your left hip to give him a focal point. During heeling, the dog has to be looking up at you, so you want to teach him right from the beginning to keep his head up. Deliver your treat straight down the seam of your pants into his upturned mouth (think of a baby bird being fed in the nest). Deliver 5-10 treats in a row with the dog's head up, then take a break. Practice this frequently throughout the day.

Once your dog is reliably keeping his head up while in heel position, you can begin to add steps. Start with only one step forward. Make sure the dog is keeping his head up for that one step, eyes on the treat in your hand. Stop after one step, deliver the treat to his upturned mouth and release him. Practice this until your dog can go from Sit to taking one step, reliably keeping his head up. When he's able to do that, add another step. Now the dog has to take two steps with his head up before getting the treat. When he's successful with that, add up to four steps, but not all at once! Two steps, treat/ four steps, treat/ one step, treat/ three steps, treat/ etc. It is very difficult for a dog to walk with his head turned up for very long, so please don't tire your dog by practicing this over and over again. Make your sessions frequent but brief.

As soon as possible, fade the lure. Up until now, the treat has been visible to the dog. Fade it by closing your fist over it so the dog can't see it. Now the food is no longer a lure, but a reward for the dog maintaining correct position. Practice taking steps as you did before, keeping your closed hand at your hip and feeding down the seam of your pants.

The next step is to remove the food from your left hand altogether. You will still pay the dog with your left hand for correct position, but the food will come from elsewhere (i.e. a bait bag on your right hip or food in your right hand transferred to your left for delivery). Remember to feed frequently – don't expect your dog to stay in perfect heel position for 15 steps! Praising your dog as you heel will help keep him in position while you add steps. Vary the number of steps you take before rewarding him.

Another way to teach heeling is to reward the dog for finding heel position on his own. Using a clicker for this will speed the process. Work off leash with smelly treats in your left hand. Simply walk around your area (make sure it's safely enclosed) as if you were heeling with your dog. When your dog shows up to see what you're doing, click and feed a treat at your left side. As he's eating the treat, walk away. If your dog is hungry and your treats are really good, he'll try to catch up to you. When he does, click and feed another treat. If your dog prefers to leave and sniff around, just keep walking as if you were heeling with your dog. Sooner or later, the dog will notice and come to you for another treat, and you'll oblige with a click and treat. After awhile, only click and treat for the dog showing up at your left side. Once he's reliably showing up at your left side, require him to stay there and take a step forward in heel position with you before clicking and treating. Raise your criteria incrementally, requiring more steps of correct heel position before the click/treat. After each click/treat, walk away briskly so he has to catch up to heel position again. You can also deliver a second treat, rolled on the ground behind you. As the dog is going for and/or eating the second treat, walk briskly away, giving him another opportunity to catch up, find heel position, and earn a click/treat.

Watching a good dog/handler team heeling together is like watching a beautiful dance. Practice as often as you can, making it fun for your dog, and you'll be amazed at how much fun it is for you, too!

