

Article 6

Walking your dog should be a pleasant time

Dear Gus:

My dog, Princess, is generally obedient when walking on a leash. I walk her with a long, retractable one and she usually follows commands to "leave it", "come" and "go home". The problem is that when a truck, or car with a loud engine comes by, she lunges and barks fiercely until the vehicle passes. She then immediately calms down, and we resume our walk. What causes this behavior, and how do I stop it and make our walks more pleasant?

Pat, Orange, CT

Gus:

Two things generally cause this problem: a failure in your fundamental obedience work, and a conditioned response to the stimulus (the vehicle) by both you and Princess. So the solution has two basic building blocks.

First, work with your dog on basic commands, such as heal and sit. You have a weak spot in your obedience, and the dog Gus doesn't understand what the appropriate behavior is. Walking Princess past any distraction, be it a truck, another animal, or a child on a bicycle, without a firm basic obedience foundation, is like trying to graduate from college if you haven't finished kindergarten. Your goal is to be able to command Princess to heal when you see the truck coming, and have her walk calmly by your side.

Begin by training on the heal command indoors, where there are few distractions, and then, once Princess follows your verbal cues all the time, move to outdoors in your yard, and finally on a walk. When Princess heals with you, give her reinforcement with generous praise and petting. When she does not follow instructions, give her a correction with a loud "No". In a relatively short time period, Princess should come and walk next to you until the distraction passes.

The next step is to overcome the conditioned response.

When Princess first lunged and barked at a truck, you probably became apprehensive and pulled on the leash firmly until the truck passed by. This told Princess that you were afraid of the truck, and needed to be protected from it.

Once the truck passed, and Princess calmed down, you probably rewarded her for calming down. But Princess thought she was being rewarded for making the truck go away. Now your behavior has become conditioned—whenever you see a truck approaching, you become apprehensive and pull back on the leash. And this is the cue to Princess to bark and lunge, make the truck go away. Your expectation (that Princess will lunge and bark) flows down the leash, and Princess gets ready to react and protect you from the truck, lunging and barking until she makes it go away.

Once you are confident in your basic obedience, call Princess to heal when you see the truck approaching. Leave the leash loose, so you do not telescope your apprehension to her. Leaving the leash loose will tell her that you are

not afraid of the truck, and she will soon stop feeling the need to chase the truck away. Good luck!

Tip of the Month:

Make sure that you check your dog for ticks at least once a day. There are a number of tick borne illnesses, Lyme disease being the most common. However, the tick usually needs to be attached to your pet at least 24 hours before it will transmit a disease. So prompt tick removal is a good way of preventing illness in your pet.

Gus Marnel is a professional trainer with a local practice. Questions may be directed to him in care of the Bulletin at 876-6800.

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