



Critters corner presents:

How to teach your dog to 'heel'

A Formal Exercise

The "heel" command is a formal obedience exercise in which a dog walks precisely by a handler's knee, matching her pace and immediately sitting when the handler halts. Your four-legged friend should know this valuable obedience exercise—for your sake and his.

As a pet owner whose dog is a companion first and obedience trial champion second (if at all), you may not be interested in the formal choreography of the "heel" exercise, either on or off lead (leash). However, though this particular command may have less day-to-day utility than "sit," its usefulness may surprise you.

A Safety Tool

When navigating crowded streets, for example, you may wish your dog would walk politely beside you without pulling on his lead. Or, there may come a day when your dog's leash is torn or lost and you have to maneuver him back to your car through a busy playground. Whatever the reason, "heel" may prove to be an important part of your dog's obedience vocabulary, once he's old enough to practice some serious self-control. While the formal "heel" command may have to wait until your puppy's a little older, even very young puppies can be taught to walk on lead without pulling.

A necessary first step, of course, is that your dog can [walk on a leash](#) without pulling. Unlike this practical skill, however, "heel" doesn't permit your dog to sniff fire hydrants or otherwise stray from the very small window beside your left knee. In practical terms, you may decide that brief breaks in your dog's otherwise undivided attention —e.g. for urination—are no problem, as long as he walks beside you again when asked.

Training with a Food Lure

The basis of positive "heeling" —as with other obedience exercises—is finding an enticing reward—such as food—and using it as a lure. Holding your dog's leash in your right hand, while taking up its slack in your left, start with your dog on your left and tell him to "Sit!" While holding a food tidbit in your left hand, bring it to his nose and say, "Spot, HEEL!" in a bright voice. Next, walk briskly for about ten paces, keeping the food slightly elevated at your side. When you stop (not too abruptly!), lift the treat slightly or pull up on the lead so that your dog sits. Now you can reward him.

Training can be greatly facilitated by the use of a head collar or head halter (Note: In obedience competitions however, a buckle or training collar must be used). If you think obedience competition may be in your dog's future, consider enrollment in an obedience training class—provided they use positive training methods—for this particular exercise. If competition isn't in the stars for your loveable companion, even casual training should include at least an introduction to this useful exercise.