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Training Dogs – Head Halter Training Synopsis

Why use a head halter?

The goal of training is to teach your dog a desirable behavior and to associate a command word with that behavior. To be successful, you must first be able to get the pet to exhibit the desired behavior reliably before adding the command. Although food, toys and targets can be used to lure pets into the correct response (see our handouts on 'Training Dogs – Learn to Earn and Predictable Rewards' and 'Training Products for Dogs – Clicker and Target Training'), the head halter and leash can be one of the most efficient ways to reliably communicate and achieve the desired response. The dog can then be rewarded in two ways; by releasing tension on the leash (negative reinforcement) and with the positive reinforcement (praise or a treat).

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Broadly speaking there are two types of head halters. The ones that are most practical for controlling and retraining most undesirable behaviors are those that act like a horse's head halter with the lead attached under the chin, such as the Gentle Leader™ and the Halti™. These head halters work on the principle that wherever the head goes the body will follow and they can also be used to pull the mouth shut (to stop barking or biting). Also available are head halters where the leash attaches behind the head such as the Canny Collar™ or the New Trix Easy Way™. Although these may work well to control pulling, they may not provide sufficient mouth and muzzle control for improving undesirable behavior. This handout is a brief review of the fitting and use of the Gentle Leader™. For more detailed information see our handout on 'Training Dogs – Head Halter Training' and 'Behavior Management Products'.

How do I get my dog to accept the head halter?

The first step is to condition your dog to seeing, touching and wearing the head halter. Pick up the Gentle Leader™ and show it to your dog. If your dog shows interest in the halter (i.e. touches or sniffs it) reward your dog. In this way, you will condition your dog to have a positive association with the head halter. The next step is to feed your dog treats through the noseband and then to slide the band over your dog's nose. Do these steps either while standing beside your dog or by having it sit and look at you. In this way you can easily slide the noseband on while feeding treats; it will stay on your dog as long as its nose is pointed upward. Finally place the halter on, (see fitting below).

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Try and keep the dog distracted and make sure that the association is positive i.e. by playing, giving food, giving a favorite treat or chew toy, or going for a walk. Never take the halter off while your dog is fighting it; this will reinforce your dog's efforts to remove the collar. Some resistance should be expected since the halter is an unfamiliar object to your dog, but before removing the head halter, work with your dog until it is calm or distracted.

How do I insure that I have a proper fit?

Proper fitting is essential for success. The Gentle Leader™ has two loops; the neck strap and the noseband. Make sure the neck strap sits just behind the ears (as high on the neck as possible) and snug enough that you can pass only one or two fingers between the strap and the dog. Now you can fit the noseband. Remove the neck strap, slide the noseband over the dog's nose and snap the neck collar in place. When viewed from the side, the head halter should form a V with the nose strap sitting behind the corners of the mouth. Now bring the nose strap toward the tip of your dog's nose and slide the clasp under your dog's chin, locking it in place so that the nose strap can be pulled to the end of the dog's nose, but stops just before it can be pulled off. If you have adjusted it appropriately, your dog will be able to open its mouth, take treats, eat, and drink, but will not be able to take it off.

How do I train with the head halter?

"Dogs tend to oppose or pull against pressure."

Dogs tend to oppose or pull against pressure. Dogs that walk or lunge ahead of their owners are therefore more likely to pull even harder if the owner pulls back on the leash. Instead, if the owner pulls upward and forward the dog is likely to move backward or sit. In addition, by pulling upward and forward, the mouth will be closed, and the dog's attention can be refocused on the owner and away from the target of its distraction (or misbehavior). A continuous pull rather than a tug or jerk should be used until the desired behavior is achieved. The other hand can also be used to gently guide the head into position (e.g. to guide the dog into a sit). By immediately releasing the tension, you indicate to the dog that it is now responding acceptably. Dogs can also be directed away from a stimulus that induces fear or aggression with a pull on the head halter. If enough tension is applied, this not only turns the dog's head but also closes the mouth.

Teaching "Sit"

Stand next to your dog, say quietly say "sit", and if your dog does not sit immediately, pull the leash upward and slightly towards the back of your dog. You can also place one hand underneath your dog's chin to direct it to sit. Immediately after your dog sits, release the leash and praise your dog. This will signal your dog that the desired behavior has occurred. Gradually practice longer and more relaxed sits before offering a reward.

Teaching "come"

Stand in front of your dog with the leash in your hand and call your dog to come; if it does not come, gently pull the leash towards you. As soon as your dog moves one step in your direction, release the tension. This signals your dog that coming towards you is the desired behavior. Repeat this until your dog is near you and then reward it.

Teaching a relaxed walk (heel)

Walk your dog next you on a short slack leash. Each time your dog moves ahead of you and puts tension on the leash, you gently pull the leash which will stop the dog's forward progress and pull the dog's head around toward you. If necessary you can even take a few steps backwards and retrace your steps to ensure that the dog proceeds properly i.e. at your side. By doing this many times and reinforcing the correct heel position, you teach your dog to walk by your side.

Teaching "back" and "turn away"

Stand beside or in front of your dog, say "back" and pull forward with the leash. When your dog steps backward, release the leash and reinforce the action with a reward. Reinforce your dog after each successful command. Another behavior that can be easily taught is the turn around or U-turn. Gently pull the dog's head around, and begin to walk in the other direction. Release and reward as soon as the dog follows you. Some dogs may need a food lure as an additional inducement to teach them to turn and follow you. These commands are useful for avoiding unwanted situations, such as avoiding aggression or fear reactions when encountering unfamiliar people or dogs.

Preventing problems

You can attach a leash to the head halter to prevent or immediately curtail problems such as food stealing, garbage raiding, jumping up, house-soiling, barking, chewing etc. Outdoor problems such as digging or stool eating can be interrupted by leaving a head halter attached to a longer outdoor line. For additional information on fitting, using and training with a head halter, go to www.ABRionline.org.