

Your Smart Dog

What to Do with Stubborn Dogs

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“My dog is so stubborn!” “He knows better, he’s just hard-headed.” Usually, the owner who says these words is frustrated with his dog because the dog’s not listening. In my 15 years of training, I’ve not yet run into a stubborn or hard-headed dog. And I don’t think that’s because I’ve figured out how to screen the stubborn or hard-headed dogs out. I don’t think there are any out there.

What could people mean, then, when they say their dog is stubborn? I think they *think* their dog is stubborn, but what they’re really seeing is an untrained dog.

They’ll say things like “He knows I asked him to sit. He’s just being stubborn because visitors are here.” Nope, he’s not being stubborn - he’s too distracted. The environment is filled with lots more exciting things, sitting’s the last thing on the dog’s mind. That doesn’t mean he’s stubborn, that means you haven’t done your training. Yep, I’m putting this one squarely on the owner, not the dog.

Look, if it were that easy for the dog to sit, he’d go ahead and sit! It’s not like sitting is difficult or time consuming. It’s pretty darn easy for a dog to do. So why wouldn’t the dog sit? Not hard-headedness, not stubbornness - it’s lack of training.

When I say lack of training, what I really mean is lack of training in the face of distractions. That’s usually what trips most dogs up, what gives them the label of stubborn and hard-headed.

Take my own dog, Nemo, as an example. He’s a puller on walks. He likes to go now, go fast, and

go far. Logically, it would be much easier and more pleasant for him to walk on a slack leash. A tight leash is (1) a lot of work for the dog - he’s constantly pulling and (2) pretty uncomfortable - the leash is pushing against his trachea and neck muscles. Wouldn’t it be more comfortable for Nemo to slow down a bit and have a nice, enjoyable loose-leash walk? Well, yes, it probably would. So why, then, would Nemo still pull?

Your dog isn’t stubborn, he’s distracted, overwhelmed by his surroundings.

Must be because he’s stubborn. Wrong. He’s excited. He’s over-threshold. He can’t wait to

find out what scent the next blade of grass holds. He wants to know which dog peed on the neighbor’s mailbox. He can’t wait to add his own scent. In short, he’s awfully excited to be out on a walk.

He’s far from stubborn or hard-headed. He’s flat out excited. Plain and simple.

But it’s much easier for me to blame Nemo, rather than put the blame where it belongs: on me. I need to spend a lot more time teaching Nemo that a slack leash is the way to get to that next blade of grass or to the neighbor’s mailbox.

What do you do if you think you have a stubborn dog? Teach him! If you’ve got a stubborn dog who pulls on the leash, get some really good treats (chicken, steak, hot dogs, etc.) and cut them into pea-sized pieces. Take your clicker and these treats with you on your walk.



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When you step out the front door, wait for your dog to look back at you. Don't say anything to him, just wait. The instant he looks in your direction, click and give him a goodie. Take another few steps and stop. Wait for him to look in your direction, click, and treat. Next, take several steps and when the leash gets tight, stop. Just wait for your dog to turn to look in your direction before you click, treat, and begin to walk again.

It's easy to teach your dog how to deal with distractions - it just takes practice, good treats, and your trusty clicker.

door? If he can't do it when no one's there, he won't be able to do it with actual guests on the front porch. He's not stubborn, he just doesn't know how to do it.

The next time you're tempted to call your dog hard-headed or stubborn, stop and think: did you really teach your dog how to do the behavior? With distractions?

Your dog will get the message that the walk will continue when he looks at you. He'll start to look at you a lot and you'll then click and treat a lot. When he's looking at you, he's probably not pulling on the leash. Voila - you've just taught you dog to walk nicely on a leash!

Thankfully, it's easy to teach the dog how to deal with distractions, it just takes some practice, some good treats, and your trusty clicker.

Happy training!

Now you've got to add in small distractions. Make a list of the things that really interest your dog. For Nemo, it's the smells that really draw him in. He loves to smell the ground, the bushes, the road. Those are Nemo's distractions - your dog could really notice other dogs, kids on bicycles, joggers, whatever.

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Helping good dogs become great dogs.

The key to success is to start where your dog notices the distraction, but isn't consumed by it. If you need to walk 100 yards away from the distraction, that's ok. You're the teacher - you set up the environment so your dog can succeed. Click and treat every second your dog doesn't react to the distraction.

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If your dog has a problem with, say jumping on guests, put your dog on a leash before your visitors arrive. You can then prevent the dog from jumping by simply keeping him away from the guests and by asking him to sit.

