

Introducing the Gentle Leader to Guide Dog Puppies

Puppies going into formal training need to be very comfortable in a Gentle Leader headcollar. We have found that if headcollars are introduced early to the puppies, they are more accepting of them. Using food rewards creates a positive association for the puppy with the headcollar. If your puppy does not seem to appreciate his kibble rewards talk to your leader/CFR about utilizing higher value food. You should begin the process outlined below as soon as you receive your puppy.

The Gentle Leader is the brand of headcollar preferred by the training department due to the relative ease with which a visually impaired person can put it on a dog. Some puppies may go through growing stages where the GL does not fit very well and a Halti may serve better. Check with your leader/CFR if the GL does not fit well, however all puppies must be accustomed to the GL before entering training.

Taking Food Appropriately

Before using food rewards for this or any other exercises where food is handed to the puppy (FIR, Go To Bed, Food Protocol) you must first introduce your puppy to taking food in an appropriate manner from your hand.

First Introducing Food Rewards from the Hand

Initially you may have difficulty getting the puppy to take the kibble; he may drop the kibble or spit it out. Be patient and help him figure out how to take the food. Some puppies may be rough when taking the food (you feel teeth on your fingers or hand as he takes the food). All puppies should be familiar with the “Doggy Zen” technique before working them with food rewards. If the puppy is grabby, consult your leader/CFR about the “Baby Bird” technique and other methods to help teach your pup to take food gently. Be sure to work on polite taking of food prior to introducing the headcollar. Do not progress to using food to introduce the headcollar until you are comfortable with how your puppy takes the food from your hand. With the majority of puppies it will only take one or two sessions to teach them to accept food rewards cleanly. Practice the Doggy Zen technique frequently throughout the time you are raising your puppy.

Notes: You do not need to ‘mark’ with the word ‘nice’ when handing your puppy food unless you are working him on the ‘Go To Bed’ exercise or if he has been put on a Food Protocol by your CFR. Verbal praise such as “good dog!” is always paired with the offering of food.

Always measure out how much food you give your puppy during training so that you can deduct that amount from his mealtimes and avoid overfeeding.

Introduction

For the first four days you are going to have your puppy wear the Gentle Leader several times per day for short periods while you are doing puppy-handling exercises. No leash should be attached at this time.

First fit the Gentle Leader by gently placing it on him and adjusting it when he is in the controlled sit position in front of you as for puppy handling. Having a helper is advisable for this introduction. Have a friend or family member adjust the fit of the headcollar while you calmly sooth and stroke the puppy. It does not have to be adjusted perfectly for the first exercises. If you are unsure how to fit the GL have your leader show you.

Step 1

- Without using the nosepiece, fit the “collar” part of the GL around the puppy’s neck, placed high and just behind the ears. Once fitted, remove the collar.
- Introduce the nosepiece only. Place the GL over the pup’s nose; don’t try to fasten the collar portion at this point. Just place the nosepiece over his muzzle and immediately give a kibble reward. Try to give the kibble as you put the nosepiece on, before the pup has time to react to the loop over his nose. This will reward him for accepting the nose loop and will form a good association with having it put on.
- Slide the nose loop off while the pup is still calm and not reacting to it. At first, you will take it off almost immediately while he is still savoring the kibble. Do this several times in the first session and do not attempt to fasten the GL collar piece during this session.

Step 2

- In the second session, again with the puppy in the controlled sit, slide the muzzle piece on with one hand as you lure his nose into the loop with a piece of kibble in your other hand. Give your pup the kibble immediately when his nose is inside the loop. Fasten the Gentle Leader collar section behind your pup’s ears and quickly give him another kibble.
- Keep popping kibbles into his mouth so that he is distracted by the food and doesn’t think about trying to react to the sensation of the GL headcollar. Avoid applying any pressure on the nose piece of the headcollar.
- Keep the headcollar on for just thirty seconds or so. Keep your puppy occupied during this time with food and calm petting.
- Remove the headcollar at a time when the puppy is calm and not making any attempt to remove it himself.

Step 3

- With the puppy still in a controlled sit put the headcollar on as above (giving him a kibble as soon as it is on) and leave it on for a minute or two while you calmly pet and rub him. So long as he is not struggling to remove the headcollar you can keep giving him a kibble now and then.
- The petting and food rewards should distract him from trying to get the headcollar off. Go very slowly for the first few days; don't be in a rush to take your hands off him while he has the GL on. You can prevent him from trying to remove the GL with your hands on his head and body.
- You may take the GL on and off several times in each handling session giving him a kibble each time you place the headcollar on him. Only remove the headcollar when he is calm.
- Once he is comfortable in the headcollar you can prepare him for being led in it by briefly applying gentle pressure and quickly giving him a piece of food. Just pull the nosepiece tight for a second as you pop a kibble into his mouth. Don't apply enough pressure to physically move him, just sufficient to cause the nosepiece to tighten momentarily.
- After the first few days of putting the headcollar on during puppy handling, you may also put the headcollar on just before you put his food bowl down for him to eat. Remove the headcollar as he finishes his meal and before he has a chance to rub or scratch at it.
- If your puppy seems comfortable with the Gentle Leader you may now attach the light, nylon puppy leash while you continue to puppy handle him in the sit position. Feed him kibble several times while he is wearing the equipment and you are holding onto him. Do not attempt to walk your puppy in the GL until he is very comfortable wearing it while stationary.

First Moving with the GL

After five days to a week of wearing the GL during puppy handling, and while eating, your pup should be ready for first walking in the GL. You should practice in a quiet, familiar area where your pup has walked comfortably with the leash attached to his flat collar – in the house or yard.

- Attach the leash to the puppy's *flat collar* and put the Gentle Leader on. Attach the safety strap to the flat collar.

- Coax the puppy into walking with you and distract him from the feel of the headcollar by luring him (holding the kibble right in front of his nose to draw him along) for just a few steps before giving it to him. Some puppies may need luring several times to get them going but most will walk right out in the headcollar without scratching or rubbing at it. Puppies determined to rub at the headcollar will need more luring to distract them.
- Only use the food as a lure to get the puppy going the first few times then stop holding the food right in front of him. Progress to walking several steps without showing the puppy the food, then bring the reward down to him.
- Make the first walks very short (e.g. from one end of the house to the other) and positive, giving several food rewards and preventing any attempts to remove the headcollar. Be sure to offer the food only when the puppy is accepting of the headcollar not when he is in mid-rub. If the puppy is doing a lot of rubbing or scratching, apply more food rewards prior to those behaviors instead of waiting for the avoidance to begin.
- Wean your puppy off the high number of food rewards gradually as he is able to walk further without any rubbing or scratching. The goal is to gradually diminish the food rewards until he is only getting a kibble when you first place the GL on him.
- Once your puppy is comfortable wearing the headcollar while walking *with the leash attached to the flat collar*, he is ready to go on to the next step. If your puppy continues to balk in the headcollar or uses efforts to remove it, consult your leader/CFR.

Attaching the Leash to the Gentle Leader

We are going to show the puppy how to respond to leash pressure on the Gentle Leader in a positive way. For this step, go back to luring with the food to help show him what to do.

- Attach the light nylon leash to the GL and grasp it close to the clip with your left hand. Lure the puppy with a kibble held in your right hand just in front of his nose. Gently pull on the GL toward the piece of kibble and let him have the kibble as soon as he takes a step and 'gives' to the guidance on the GL. Release the pressure on the GL as soon as he takes a step forward.
- Repeat the above four or five times in a forward direction then do the same with pressure to have him move left and right. Use lots of happy verbal praise as you do this.

- Repeat the above steps without using the food as a lure i.e. *don't* hold the kibble right in front of his nose coaxing him. Now have him follow the headcollar and leash pressure for three of four steps before giving him a piece of kibble. Always release pressure as soon as he responds to the cue and encourage him with praise as he moves along.
- Now you are ready to take him for some little walks in a familiar area with the leash attached to the GL. Give him a kibble occasionally for coming along and be sure to offer it to him by the seam of your left pant leg when he is in heel position.

After two weeks your pup should be accepting the headcollar and walking out nicely in it. He should be weaned off all food rewards associated with the headcollar at this time unless directed otherwise by your leader/CFR.

If your puppy is still resistant or uncomfortable in the headcollar after two weeks please check with your leader/CFR for further recommendations.

Guide dog puppies in training should continue to wear the Gentle Leader at least 50% of the time that they are out in public throughout their raising. This will ensure that they stay comfortable and accepting of this important piece of equipment.

Note:

We also need puppies to learn collar response so at meetings, and other training sessions, your puppy may be worked on his usual flat collar. Always consult your leader and/or CFR before changing equipment on your puppy.