

Dog Training Articles By Beth Bradley

The Walk

Last month my German Shepherd Dog Anya was selected for a part in a movie filming in New York City. Anya had to play the role of a stray dog 'meandering' on the streets of Manhattan. This was a big stretch for a bitch that does everything fast; but as always she lived up to my expectations and then some.

However, if you have ever worked on a television or movie set you know that a lot of time you sit around waiting for the scene to be set up. We waited about five hours for the crew to get to our scene and prepare it.

It was a great June evening and the City was alive. There had to be at least 40 to 50 dogs that were out for walks with their owners. All breeds and all sizes of dogs passed by the movie set that evening. There were small Chihuahuas, many medium sized mixed breeds and numerous large dogs. I saw at least 5 pit bulls and 3 bull terriers. Many of the owners knew each other so they would stop, say their hellos, the dogs would sniff each other and then they would move on.

This went on for hours at a time. Each owner had a different collar and leash on their dog. Some had a six foot leashes, others had flexi leashes. Some had prong collars while others walked their dogs wearing a harness. What struck me immediately was that, these dogs were not pulling their owners; and they were not growling at other dogs or people or lunging at other dogs or people. These dogs were not phased by the traffic, the noise or the mass chaos of people around them.

These dogs were better than most of my clients walking into a basic or intermediate class. These dogs were better not because of better breeding or more training, these dogs were better behaved because they were walked many times a day. From a young puppy they were walked for exercise and for housebreaking. New York City is a lively place so the dogs had to get used to people and sounds from a young age. They were walked several times per day so they were never in a 'rush' to go out; the walk was not something special that was done once a week. This activity was not novel, so the walk was something done at a leisurely pace.

The Importance of the Walk

Living in the suburbs with big yards is one of the worst things that happened to the 'pet dog' in this decade. Exercise is left to a ball throw in the yard, not a walk. I tell all of my beginners at their first lesson to get outside and walk their dog at least 20 minutes per day.

The walk is so important on many levels. First, the walk teaches the dog that you are Alpha. When you are walking a puppy, most lag behind, so you are teaching

them by your body language that they are not Alpha and that they should be walking behind you. As they get older, they are used to this being their position so this is easily taught by using the command 'heel'. Second, the walk stimulates a dog's mind. The dog is taking in so many scents and sights that not only will the walk physically tire your dog but he will also be mentally tired from thinking about the smells and sights he took in on the walk. Third, the walk is a way to socialize your dog with people and other dogs.

You will rarely see a dog trainer with his or her personal dog in a dog park. They may go to the dog park to train their dog but not to run and play with the other dogs. I would never have my dog in a dog park; I don't want my dogs picking up other dogs bad habits. The walk socializes them. The walk teaches the dog that there are other people out there in the universe and that they have to adjust to new people all of the time. The dog has to adjust to and accept the new faces of both people and dogs that they are meeting on this walk.

Many dogs are frustrated when on the leash because they can't do what they want to do and see whom they want to see so they become aggressive; this is called leash frustration. If the dog is walked infrequently, everything is exciting and new, and if you do not let him investigate, he becomes frustrated. But a dog that is walked often usually doesn't have this frustration because it is not novel. Dogs that are walked often are not frazzled by new people, new dogs, loud sounds or chaos on the streets.

Conclusion

A change in their behavior during a walk is not going to happen overnight. These dogs that I saw in NYC were started as young pups, not older dogs. But you will see a change in your dog when you integrate a walk into its daily routine. A yard is the worse thing for a dog. A dog needs walks for socialization, for mental stimulation and for physical stimulation.

Walking your dog regularly often will release the leash frustration that many dogs have. But I caution you not to let your dog drag you and pull you from tree to tree. A walk is supposed to teach him that you are his Alpha so you must set certain limitations during the walk and he must obey them. Your dog can NEVER pull you on a walk but doesn't need to focus on you're the whole time. Let him or her sniff at your discretion but remember it is a walk for physical exercise also and stopping every two minutes is not physical enough of a walk.

If you live in a rural area, drive your dog to the city and walk him. Get him around noises, sites, traffic and people. Socialize him by walking. Don't stop and let him greet everyone, he may not like that, but get him out and about and get him used to ignoring people and other dogs. Don't just bring him to a dog park to run and play, teach him about the world by showing him the world. It is similar to driving your child across country to learn about different states. Leave your yard for parties and quick restroom uses by your dog. Walk him every day and I guarantee that you will

see a behavioral change in him that you could not imagine. And, it is better for your health also.