

Dogs Going to School

The new school year is almost upon us; schedules will be busting at the seams with meal prep, homework, extra-curricular activities and getting to school and work on time. Being a parent myself, I know these hectic mornings very well and I'm always looking for creative ways to multitask, so I can complete two or three jobs at once. One of those was walking my dog and my son to school together.

Taking your dog to school can be a great way to exercise and socialize your dog; if they enjoy it and it doesn't add extra work for you. If your dog is already calm and Zen around a melee of people and children, doesn't mind being approached and petted by people of any age, and is able to match your walking pace to the school, then you are all set to go!

My previous dog Lola was well-known by students and staff at the school because she would accompany us every day for pick-up and drop-off, unless it was raining. Sometimes she would take her stuffy on the walk to show everyone at school. She loved the attention, was great walking in crowds and could slow down and speed up when I needed her to. She knew when we were running late and would be ok with missing out on her sniffs until my son was dropped off. It worked out very well for everyone!

Here are some signs that your dog is very comfortable making the walk to and from school:

- Able to focus on you and watch everything calmly.
- Able to sit or lie down when asked.
- Soft body language such as squinty eyes, mid-height tail wag, relaxed ears and mouth, perhaps a slight pant.
- When people approach and pet, your dog remains comfortable and may often elicit more attention by turning towards them, bumping their hand with their nose or head.

If your dog is shy or anxious around people, especially children, then this would not be the best opportunity to help your dog gain confidence. The school yard in the morning and afternoon is just too chaotic for dogs who are uncomfortable, and it may increase fear and anxiety because it will overwhelm your dog. If you see a few of the following signs, it would be best to leave your dog at home:

- Stopping along the way to school and refusing to move forward.
- Trying to get away from people or hiding behind you.
- Turning away from people when they approach or pet.
- Showing whites of the eyes, yawning, or licking their lips often while at the school or when people approach.
- Lunging, barking or growling.

Even if your dog loves and gets really excited about people, children, or other dogs, it is best to wait to take your dog to school. These trips to the school can reinforce pulling, jumping and

barking. These are attention seeking behaviors, and very often get rewarded directly by people coming over to pet your dog when they exhibit these behaviors or indirectly by you trying to stop the behavior. Any attention can be good attention for some dogs!

I know this personally and professionally because of our newest addition, Galaxy; a young socialite who makes her presence known to every dog and person with a funny “roo roo” sound, pulling at the leash or, if you get too close, a little lick or a jump. After the third time taking Galaxy on the walk to school, I realized that it was just too much for her. Although multitasking made my life easier, it was not an ideal time or environment to train my young pup, so I made a training plan to set her up for success. Here is what I did, with a few additional tips:

- Get your dog used to the route when there is less activity going on.
- Practice the route at different speeds in case you are running late! A cue like “let’s go!” can be useful to teach.
- If you have a stroller, practice walking your dog with the stroller at different speeds.
- Walk by the school when everyone is inside, or on the weekend and praise and reward your dog for looking at the school calmly.
- Go to a park and, from a distance, have your dog watch the children while feeding your dog something yummy as a reward for being calm. Over time, you can slowly move closer to the activity. This may take a few days or maybe weeks, depending on your dog.
- For your first couple of trial runs taking your dog on the walk to school, see if you can have someone come with you to pick up your child(ren) so that you can work on calm behavior from a distance and slowly move closer. This will set your dog up for success, reinforce calm behavior and avoid having your dog repeat unwanted behavior.
- Have lots of treats ready for “treat bombs.” Take a handful of treats and drop them on the ground to get your dog sniffing. Your dog will easily associate the school with this fun, calming game and will give you time to chat to other parents and wait for your child(ren) while your dog is calm.

Galaxy can now calmly walk to school and wait for her human brother and will often just sniff around. She does still give a good “roo roo” to the kids she knows, but I don’t mind that. It took a couple of weeks, but by taking time and helping Galaxy to understand what is expected of her by making it easy and practicing, we have a dog who can walk to school with us for many years.



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In addition to the certifications above, Andrea is certified through the Karen Pryor Foundations and Kids Around Dogs, and she has also taken the Masters Course in Dog Aggression through AggressiveDog.com. She is the founder of EduCanine and City Dogs Training & Behavior and also created “The Rescue Plan.”