

6. Some Common Problems

In the first months of working with your dog, it is likely that you will encounter problems that can be overcome easily, providing that the cause can be identified quickly. Listed below are some of the problems that are reported frequently by newly qualified Guide Dog owners. We have given the possible causes of each problem and some methods of overcoming them, which you may have forgotten since training.

If you are unable to improve the problem with the help of these instructions, you should contact GDTx for further advice. **It is much better to gain advice before small problems become serious ones.**

6.1 High Tension: If Your Dog Pulls In Harness

Possible Causes

- Food incentive
- Over-willing dog
- Owner being too tense on the handle
- Owner's method of control is ineffective

Possible Remedies

- The willingness of your dog may be too high on particular routes that the dog knows end in a pleasurable destination. A change in route to the same destination may help. Using less incentive may lower the willingness. For example, try using less vocal praise and hand signals.
- When walking your dog in harness, you should have a light and relaxed grip on the handle. If your arm is tense or you grip the handle tightly, the dog may pull against this tension. Regularly check that you are as relaxed as possible.
- If your dog requires physical and/or vocal corrections to control the tension, the level administered must be such that a response is gained from the dog as soon as possible. Physical control that is too gentle only succeeds in making your dog resilient to your corrections, so always try to be effective with your initial correction. If you are in doubt as to how to give a physical correction, you should contact GDTx.
- When using vocal corrections, it is very important that your tone of voice is calm but firm, thereby letting the dog know in no uncertain terms what is required from him/her. Sitting your dog frequently also assists in lessening tension. Be sure to walk at a moderate speed yourself. If you walk too fast, this acts as an incentive to your dog.
- If the problem occurs at a time just before the dog is fed, it may be helpful to change the feeding time so this incentive is diminished.

6.2 Low Tension: If Your Dog's Speed or Tension Is Insufficient

Possible Causes

- Dog's willingness has dropped
- Owner's method of control is ineffective
- Dog is ill

Possible Remedies

- If this problem presents itself suddenly and is out of character with your dog, it is likely that your dog is ill. If in doubt, contact your veterinarian.
- Routes used very frequently or those which have a destination that your dog finds unpleasant or boring, are likely to be the routes where the willingness drops. A change of route or destination may create added interest for the dog, especially if a free run can be included.

When you reach your destination, be sure to give your dog plenty of praise so that he/she associates that destination with pleasure. Other people at the destination may be asked to help by making the dog welcome there. When covering such routes, be sure to give your dog as much incentive as possible in the form of vocal and physical praise.

6.3 Scavenging When Working

Possible Causes

- Insufficient control
- Inconsistent control
- Lack of awareness

Possible Remedies

- Scavenging is a serious problem. It results in poor concentration, often in areas where good concentration is needed most. If you suspect that your dog is stopping, deviating from your usual route, or lowering his/her head to pick up rubbish, correct immediately using a physical check on the handle as well as vocal commands such as, "No! Leave it!"
- Never give your dog the benefit of the doubt as far as scavenging or other distractions are concerned. Correct on the smallest suspicion of a misdemeanor. If your assessment of the situation was correct, you have checked the development of a potentially major problem. If you were wrong, the dog does not bear you a grudge, providing you remember to balance your corrections with praise.
- In an area which you know is badly strewn with food and rubbish, it may be wise to keep your lead loosely held in your right hand. In this way, you are able to give a firm, instant leash correction for any attempts to scavenge.
- If your dog succeeds in picking up food, you must stop immediately, correct him/her vocally using a firm tone of voice, and remove the food from his/her mouth.
- If scavenging appears to be worsening, you must contact GDTx immediately so that an aftercare visit can be arranged.

6.4 Food Refusal Training

If your dog steals food in the home or scrounges for tidbits, firm corrective measures should be taken. Such training usually necessitates setting "traps" and gaining the assistance of a sighted friend or member of the family. First, always remember that prevention is better than cure and your dog should never be allowed the chance to steal or scrounge for food. Food left close to the edge of the table is a great temptation for any unsupervised dog!

Guide Dog Owner Information Booklet

Thief

There are two basic problems to be overcome. The first is the thief. Begin by placing a plate of food (cookies, perhaps) on a low table or chair in your lounge. Bring your dog into the room on the lead and make him/her lie down near the food. If he/she makes any attempt to sniff the plate, correct him/her firmly with the check chain and with your voice – “No! Leave it!”

Do this for several sessions – until your dog shows no interest in the food – before allowing him/her off the lead. If he/she is tempted to take advantage of his/her newfound freedom, use a very firm voice to discourage him/her. If necessary, return to leash-controlled situations and start the training again.

Beggar

The second type of problem dog is the beggar. A dog that begs for tidbits is quite likely to receive them, whereas one that ignores such temptations will probably not.

The result of this behavior is the increased likelihood of both obesity and unfavorable responses from members of the public who do not wish to be drooled upon by a dog. Once established, begging is a difficult but not impossible habit to break.

Education of the human offenders should be the starting point. It is necessary to set up “traps” with the help of friends or relatives. The procedure is quite straightforward but, as with any other form of control, it is important that it is applied with due regard to the sensitivity of each individual dog. Quite simply, you begin with your dog on the lead, sitting or lying down quietly beside you. Your assistant then offers your dog a biscuit or similar item of food, making sure that it remains just out of reach of your dog’s mouth.

As soon as your dog makes a move towards the “bait”, apply both vocal and physical corrections, as outlined above. You need to be very firm initially. Repeat this exercise daily, preferably using different times, locations, and assistants, so your dog does not learn to refuse food only in certain situations but rather develops a general awareness of how to behave in the event of temptation from any source.

6.5 Anticipation

When your dog uses his/her initiative and performs a task without being given a command to do so, he/she is anticipating. Anticipation is acceptable providing it is under control. If unchecked, anticipation results in the dog dictating to you and taking short cuts that can be an inconvenience at the least and a serious hazard at worst. Discretion is required in your assessment of just how far from “the book” you should allow your dog to go. Dogs vary in their degree of initiative and, while some seldom use it, others most certainly will.

Experience has shown that the most efficient and problem-free Guide Dog Units are those who adhere absolutely to the instruction given and the principles laid down while training at GDTx. In view of this, you are advised to continue to work strictly in “straight lines”, executing proper turns at junctions and generally preventing your dog from taking action before or without being given a command.

Anticipation may be permitted when your dog’s help is needed in order for you to find a particular place – for example, an entrance to a shop. This advice applies equally to new Guide

Dog owners and replacements as, in both cases, the dogs are new and need the security of formal work until they are established and confident. In this way, you remain in control and won't experience the frequent battles of will which occur all too often between owners and dogs whose initiative has become self-indulgence and willfulness.

6.6 Right Shoulder Work: If You Receive Brushes or Bumps When Working Your Dog

Possible Causes

- Dog's right shoulder work needs reinforcing
- Owner's speed is too fast
- Owner's following is poor

Possible Remedies

- When you receive a brush or bump, you must stop and tap the obstacle if possible. Then correct your dog by saying his/her name followed by a physical correction with the handle, combined with the vocal command, "Over". These corrections must be sufficient to make your dog look around and see what happened. By using this method, you reinforce your dog's right shoulder work. Even if you are in doubt as to whether or not your dog is at fault, it is better to presume that your dog was and so correct him/her for his/her mistake.
- Never hit the dog with your hand or push him/her over with your knee as a form of correction. Keep the volume of your voice as low as possible, even though you need to try to sound cross. It is important to avoid criticism from members of the public. Always remember to balance your corrections with plenty of praise.
- When entering areas in which you regularly receive brushes and bumps, slow down, ensure that you are relaxed and walking in the correct position, and do not fall behind your dog. Follow your dog as carefully as you can and do not allow a gap to open up between the two of you. If you find this difficult, you are probably going too fast.

If you continue to receive bumps, contact GDTx for advice.

6.7 Off Curb Work: If Your Dog Does Not Return Quickly to the Curb When Negotiating Off-curb Obstacles

Possible Causes

- Obstacle is too difficult for the dog to cope with
- Owner's positioning is wrong
- Owner's use of voice and hand signals is ineffective
- Owner's speed is excessive

Possible Remedies

- When meeting an off-curb obstacle for the first time, it is advisable to gain sighted assistance in negotiating the obstacle and thereby determine whether or not you and your dog can safely cope when the same obstacle is met again. This is especially important if the obstacle is situated on a busy road where you may be in danger from traffic by leaving the curb.

Guide Dog Owner Information Booklet

- Check your positioning when in the road. With the road on the right, you should be in front of the normal walking position and facing slightly towards the dog. Voice and hand signals are used to encourage the dog to the left and so back to the curb.
- With the road on the left, you should hang back behind the normal walking position and face slightly away from the dog. Again, voice and hand signals are used to encourage your dog but, this time, to the right and so back to the curb. As an added incentive to the dog, take the lead in the right hand when in the road.
- When negotiating off-curb obstacles, keep to a slow or steady speed. This helps you stay in position, ensuring that you are not in the road longer than necessary and minimizing the risk of tripping on the curb as you return to the pavement.