A person and dog with leashes

Description automatically generated**Chapter 27: Stairs and Escalators**

This chapter will review the basic skill set of navigating stairs and go into greater detail about the different types of stairways you may encounter. Although these skills were introduced early in training, there are many more factors to consider as you and your dog progress as a team and begin to work in more varied environments. We will also introduce advanced concepts such as using escalators with your dog.

As a guide dog handler, you always have the choice to work your dog or heel your dog while ascending or descending stairs. As introduced in Chapter 7, it is best for new teams to begin with heeling on stairs before advancing to working. This gives the handler an opportunity to establish good control on stairs. In either case, you can utilize the targeting command “To the Steps” to direct your dog to locate a staircase. Guide dogs are conditioned during training to target nearby staircases. For ascending steps, your dog should indicate by stopping with their front feet on the first step. For descending, they should stop at the edge of the top step. At this point you should always praise and/or reward your dog for identifying the target, then you can choose to either set the harness down and heel on the stairs or continue with harness in hand.

# **Working on Stairs**

Working a guide dog up and down stairs can feel quite different than working on level ground. Keep in mind the following procedures as you begin to practice working your dog on stairs:

* Once your dog has targeted a staircase either up or down, locate the first step by probing with your left foot. At this point you may also choose to locate the handrail with your right hand. Holding the handrail is acceptable while working or heeling on stairs.
* Be prepared to move with your dog as you give the “Forward” command. Unlike working on level ground, you should **not** allow your dog to pull ahead on stairs. You and your dog should move together up or down stairs without any tension in the harness.
* Use the “Wait” command as needed to ask your dog to pause on the stairs so you can catch up. Do not rush to keep up with your dog. Always ascend and descend at a pace that is comfortable and safe for you. Your dog will learn to match your pace with a little practice.

Many dogs try to rush up or jump down the last step or two. You can counteract this by maintaining good positioning throughout the staircase and asking for a Wait as you approach the end. Your dog should not pull you on stairs whether on leash or in harness. If you find your dog continuing to try to pull while working on stairs, you may need to return to heeling on stairs until good control is established.

**Types of Stairs**

A **closed stairwell** is the most common, with a solid wall on both sides and solid treads and risers. Guide dogs are very comfortable using this type of staircase and it shouldn't pose any problems.

**Open-sided stairs** are fairly common as well with a low glass wall or just a handrail and open air on one or both sides. Guide dogs are generally accustomed to this type of stairwell as well, though you may find they want to look out the open sides as they assess the situation.

**Open-backed** stairs do not have solid risers, they are “open” between the treads and may have open or closed sides. Guide dogs should be comfortable with this type of stairs, but you may find they wat to look between the treads. Be patient and let your dog assess the situation, especially if you do not encounter this type of stairs often.

**Grated stairs** have treads that are made of perforated steel or other material that is not fully solid. This type of stairs is typically open-backed and open-sided as well. Some dogs may be skeptical of this type of staircase due to how open it is. In some cases, the grated treads may also have somewhat sharp texture that is uncomfortable for the dog’s paws.

**Spiral stairs** are uncommon, but if you do encounter them you will likely find it all but impossible to work your dog. Spiral stairs are typically fairly narrow and only the outer section is comfortable to walk on due to the twisting design. They are often open-backed and open-sided as well. If you do need to use this type of staircase, you may need to allow your dog to walk slightly in front of you or behind you on leash.

**Split stairs** and **landings** are also common when long flights are divided into sections with level landings in between. Landings may be straight, quarter turn, or half turn in either direction. When working your dog in this type of situation, he should stop to indicate each new section of steps whether you’re heading up or down.

Additionally, keep in mind that the narrower and steeper a particular set of steps is, the more likely that your dog may start to feel uncomfortable. Be patient with your dog if you should encounter a challenging staircase. And, as always, discuss with your instructor if you feel your dog is having any difficulty on stairs. Problems on stairs can escalate quickly and become dangerous for you as the handler.

**Targeting the Handrail**

Many guide dogs will not only target the first step with their front feet, but they will also target the handrail with their nose. Many handlers find this behavior find this behavior is helpful in locating the handrail and gives the handler an extra sense of security as the dog positions himself slightly in front of the handler. This can be comforting particularly at the top of descending stairs. To encourage this behavior, place your closed fist at the handrail and have your dog “Touch”. Deliver food reward right at the handrail as well. As your dog becomes proficient, you’ll be about to drop the Touch cue. Simply reach out to locate the handrail, mark with “Yes”, then reward your dog. Reinforce the behavior consistently in a variety of location to help your dog generalize.

**Escalators**

Although escalators fall under the general category of “stairs”, there are specific techniques and safety factors to take into account. Learning to take your dog on escalators is an optional lesson at Guiding Eyes, and people choose to use or not use escalators for various reasons. If you think you might use an escalator with your dog in the future, you will need to complete the lesson with your instructor. In the class setting, this can be done over several workouts and most teams will start with Juno exercises on the escalator. If you opt out of escalator training with your instructor, ***you may not use an escalator after you go home with your dog.*** Different Guide Dog Schools use slightly different techniques to teach the dogs escalators, so it is important to use the method your dog has been trained with.

Using an escalator can be done safely but there is a potential risk of injury to your dog if you are not using appropriate techniques for boarding and exiting. Using escalators is also a skill that must be kept up. If you do not encounter escalators regularly, you and your dog are at risk of losing the skills necessary to ride safely. This should be taken into account when deciding whether or not to train on escalators.

The procedures for boarding and exiting are the same whether the escalator is going up or down, however it is very important to be aware of which direction you are heading.

**Boarding the escalator:**

* Cue your dog to approach a nearby escalator with the targeting command “To the Steps”. Your dog should stop to signal that you are on the metal plate at the beginning of the escalator.
* Once your dog stops on the plate, immediately reach for the handrail and check to make sure it is moving away from you. \**If you find the railing is moving toward you, move out of the way quickly as there are likely people moving toward you on the escalator*\*
* When you’ve confirmed that you are at the correct escalator, set down the harness handle. Hold the leash short enough to keep your dog slightly behind you as your probe forward with your left foot to locate the edge of the plate.
* Pause at the edge of the plate (3-5 seconds) to assure there is no one directly in front of you on the escalator. This also gives your dog a moment to suss out the escalator and allows you to feel for the moving steps if you wish.
* When you’re ready, step onto the moving escalator as you tell your dog “Let’s go!”.
* Once you and your dog have boarded, you need to establish a stationary position. Use the “Stay” command as you step forward so that you are standing one step ahead of your dog. Extend your right hand on the handrail and lay your palm flat on top so that you will be able to feel the rail start to bend at the end of the escalator.
* Continue to softly praise your dog and remind him “Stay” as you ride up or down and prepare to exit.

**Exiting the escalator:**

* This is the most dangerous part. It is imperative that your dog be in motion as he crosses the edge of the plate, and that there is no tension on the leash.
* When you feel the handrail start to bend to level out that is your cue to initiate moving off the escalator with purpose. This will be as the steps are just beginning to level out so expect uneven steps. Move your feet as you tell your dog “Let’s go!”
* Give your dog plenty of leash and allow them to pass you as you both step off the escalator.
* Take a few steps forward to be sure you are clear of the escalator before picking up your harness to continue working.

The same technique is used for escalators going up or down. However, when boarding an escalator going up the dogs typically take a few steps to come to a stop, once they do that is when you will need to step up farther on the escalator. When getting on a down escalator the dogs get on and stop more readily. In either direction it is important to keep the leash loose and do not hold the dog in place by keeping the collar tight.

A Few More Things to Keep in Mind:

* Once the dog has targeted the plate at the beginning of an escalator, all responsibility shifts to the handler. You are responsible for initiating when to start moving getting on or off the escalators.
* If the dog is too far ahead of you on the escalator, you will need to move ahead of the dog, don’t try to get the dog to come back up or down the escalator to you.
* Be sure to leave space ahead of you when boarding. You need room to get into a good position after boarding AND room to get moving when exiting the escalator.
* You should not get on an escalator that is not in motion, if it does start you may be facing the wrong direction!
* By law there is always an alternate option, if the mall is too crowded or you don’t feel it is safe to do escalators at that moment take the stairs or an elevator.
* Please do not use a wooden or antique escalator, these are not safe for the dogs. There is one in NYC.
* Keep your attention on your dog while on the escalator.
* Your dog needs to be in motion with a loose leash when the step meets the plate at the end of the escalator, or there is a high risk of injury to the dog’s paw pads.
* Do not work the dog on or off the escalators, as this increases the risk of injury.
* If you have trouble feeling the bend in the handrail with your hand, you can initiate movement when the steps start to get closer together. This involved the alternative technique of riding with your feet on two different steps.

\*If you have chosen not to do escalator training with your dog while in class, then at some point in the future your situation changes and you find you would like to be able to use them, please contact the school for assistance. We can set up a follow up and make sure your dog is still able to do them, as well as teach you the proper technique.

\*A note about moving sidewalks - We **do not** advise guide dog handlers to use moving sidewalks. Typically, these are in larger airports utilized by passengers hurrying through the terminals. The moving sidewalks are long flat conveyor belts that are wide enough for two people to stand side by side. Usually people who get on and stand still will stay to the right, and people walking will stay to the left. They aren’t wide enough to work along if the dog needs to clear you of a stationary passenger. If you get on and stand still the dog is at risk of getting bumped or hit with luggage from passing passengers on your left. Also, the end of the handrail is beyond the plate, the guide dog handler has no tactile reference point that the end is approaching, and the transition back onto the stationary plate is even more dangerous than a standard escalator.

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