A person and dog with leashes

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**Chapter 7: Living with Your New Guide Dog**

Your journey as a new handler has now officially begun. There will be a lot of information to take in over the next days and weeks, but one of the primary goals will be to build a strong relationship with your dog and establish yourself as a good leader. This chapter contains some detailed information about how to communicate with your dog, why it’s important to take a leadership role, and some specific techniques for navigating through normal daily routines as a guide dog team. We will also talk about using the crate in your room and what to expect during your first night with your dog.

First, a bit about leadership. Of course, there will be many times that you ask your guide dog to lead you. The dogs have been through many months of training to understand responsibility in their work. However, in order to build a good working relationship, you must first establish a solid relationship with your dog. Your dog needs to understand that you are ultimately in control. Everyone has probably heard some version of the story that dogs are descended from wolves, and that they need pack structure with a dominant Alpha that is always in control. While this can be taken to an extreme in some training circles, there is still some validity to the theory. Dogs may not need an “Alpha” per se, but they do need some degree of structure provided by the handler in order to be successful in a human world. Dogs are opportunistic learners. They have learned through thousands of years of domestication that cooperation with humans is beneficial to them. Only in more recent times have humans learned to capitalize on this. But even with lots of advances in positive training methods, dogs still need a human leader that they can count on, especially when we are asking the dog to perform complicated tasks, like guidework.

There are several elements that help to make a person a good leader and finding the balance of good leadership is an ongoing process for each team. Dogs generally thrive on structure, understanding what is expected of them in any situation so that they can respond accurately and calmly without any undue stress. Sounds easy enough, right....? You may find it’s not as easy as it seems, but that is why we are all here. To become a good leader, and a good guide dog handler, you must strive to be fair, clear and responsible.

What does that mean?

**Be fair.** This means you behave the same way all the time in the presence of the dog. If you behave inconsistently the dog will respond inconsistently as well. Your dog can easily become confused which creates stress and can trigger an array of unwanted behaviors. Being fair means understanding when to set clear boundaries for your dog, and when to provide praise and encouragement to support them.

**Be clear.**  Use language that the dog can understand. Instructors will work closely with you explaining how to speak calmly and remain emotionally neutral in the presence of the dog. We will review the specific commands and cues that the dog is familiar with and will eventually teach you how to introduce a new command. Remember that while it is possible to teach your dogs new commands, introducing too many new words or body language, especially early in your relationship, will likely confuse the dog and cause a poor response.

**Be responsible.** Having a dog is a lot like having a small child in your home. The dog will be providing mobility and companionship for you, but it will also need constant care. Your dog will need to be fed and allowed to relieve itself on a regular basis. Your dog will thrive on having a routine. He or she will need daily exercise through working and playing, and will need to visit a veterinarian at least once a year. As a handler, you must take responsibility for your dog's overall wellbeing and all that that entails.

These are some of the building blocks of good leadership that should play a part in every interaction with your dog. Next, we’ll get into some basic techniques that you will be using every day.

**Moving Through Public Spaces at Guiding Eyes**

When moving about the dormitory, keep your dog on short leash and under control. This is an opportunity for you and your dog to practice good behavior in public and indoor spaces. Dogs explore their environment with their mouths and noses, so always pay close attention to where their heads are. When you first arrived for training, certain rules concerning the manner of moving about the building were explained. Now that you have dogs, the dormitory is more crowded, and observing these rules helps to assure that neither students nor dogs will be hurt by being bumped into or stepped on.

**To review, here are the rules for moving about the building with your dog:**

* Stay to the right side of hallways and stairways.
* Announce your presence when entering a room or hallway.
* Keep your dog close to you and out of the way of others.
* Anytime you are stationary have your dog sit or lie down, a standing dog will be more likely to wander and get into mischief.

**Additional guidelines for success:**

* **DO NOT** work your dogs in harness indoors or without an instructor present until Instructors communicate to you that it is time to do so.
* Dogs in class should not be allowed to play with one another unless it has been approved by an instructor. Initial play sessions between handler and dog are a vital part of the bonding process.
* Focus on your own dog and do not make attempts to interact with your classmates’ dogs. This includes avoiding saying other dogs' names as well as not giving instruction to other students. Remember that each team receives individualized training. Something that works for you may not be appropriate for another team. Please speak with an instructor if you feel there is a problem.

**Proper Heeling Technique**

It is of vital importance that you understand that walking with your dog in Heel position at your left side (“Heeling”) is vastly different than working your dog in harness. Much of our focus in early stages is on Heeling and establishing leadership. As training progresses, you will have more and more opportunities to work your dog in harness, but it will remain paramount that you understand the difference and keep the distinction as clear as possible.

One of the first things you will work on after receiving your dog is how to properly walk with them in Heel position at your left side. From the beginning of your relationship with your new guide dog it is essential for you to maintain a certain level of control over them, and learning to walk with your dog on a loose leash and staying nicely at your side is a big part of establishing leadership. If your dog begins to pull on leash it should be addressed immediately as this can easily lead to a habit of sniffing, scavenging or distraction.

Most dogs have a natural tendency to want to forge ahead while heeling. This can be especially true for guide dogs as they may try to take over the leadership role when they are uncertain of a new handler. One of the very first exercises you will work on is heeling just a few steps, ideally with slack in the leash, then commanding your dog to “Sit” and rewarding them with food in the correct position. This will be repeated many, many times until your dog can maintain focus on you without forging ahead. The ultimate goal is that you will be able to walk several paces on a loose leash, come to a stop and have your dog sit without ever putting tension on the leash. This exercise should be reviewed throughout training to ensure proper heeling is maintained.

At some point, you will likely need to give leash cues along with the “Heel” command to get your dog back into the heel position. Leash correction may also be warranted if the dog fails to respond to the "Heel" command. Correction will be covered in more detail a bit later, but generally a leash correction is a snap or pop of the leash in the direction you want the dog's head to go: if the dog is pulling ahead of you, the snap should be straight back; if the dog is pulling to one side, the snap should be towards your body, etc. An effective leash correction will always consist of a short snap that begins and ends with no tension on the leash, then immediately followed by another command (redirection) and plenty of praise when the dog complies.

When you are heeling the dog, it is your responsibility to know where you are going. This includes knowing if you will be encountering any stairs, doorways, or other changes in elevation. The dog is not responsible for indicating these things while heeling, however it is in your best interest to continue to pattern your dog by pausing or stopping at these locations. You may also choose to have your dog Sit and reward at key locations like steps or other changes in elevation. This provides consistency and the dog is much more likely to pick up the targets accurately when you do begin working in harness.

If necessary, you may use your cane while heeling your dog. However, you will likely find it beneficial to get to know the building well enough to navigate without your cane or by trailing the walls. Managing your cane and dog simultaneously can be quite a challenge. If you do choose to use your cane in conjunction with heeling your dog, be aware of times when you might be approaching another dog and do your best to avoid startling other dogs by touching them with your cane. This can be accomplished by communicating with classmates as you approach seating or common areas and inquiring where they and their dogs are located.

**Navigating doors with your dog**

Doors of all types will be utilized by the guide dog team during the course of a normal day. You must use caution when navigating doors to ensure that your dog is not caught or hit by a closing door as you go through. The golden rule is that the handler should always position themselves between the door and the dog. In other words, the dog should be positioned away from the door hinges. This means that the handler must consider which side of a door the hinges are on before opening it to pass through.

Most guide dogs work on the handler’s left side, so if a door is hinged on the right side (handler’s side), no additional action is necessary. The handler can push or pull the door open with the right hand and walk straight through with no danger of the dog be caught by the closing door.

If the door is hinged on the left side (dog’s side), the handler must take action to place themselves between the door and the dog. There are two basic methods by which to accomplish this:

**#1- "Side” Method**

To use this method, approach the door normally, touch the door handle and praise your dog. Next, pass the leash behind your back into your right hand. Give the verbal command "Side” as you step slightly left in front of your dog. At the same time, light collar pulses can be given to communicate to the dog that you would like for them to move behind and to the other side of your body. Next, push or pull the door open with you left hand and walk through the door with your dog on the right side. If your dog lags behind, you can say “Let's go” to encourage them to come all the way through. Once clear of the door, allow the dog to come slightly in front of you, pass the leash in front of your body into the left hand, and give the “Heel” command to bring the dog back to the left side. This method allows the handler to maintain orientation while still protecting the dog from the closing door. Your body remains between the dog and the door at all times.

**#2- Pivot Method**

To use this method, approach the door normally, touch the door handle and praise your dog. Keep the leash in the left hand and prepare to open the door with the right hand. As you begin to push or pull the door open, turn your body to face your dog. Your right hand, shoulder and back should maintain contact with the door as your back through the door and allow your dog to come through past you. Continue to turn toward your dog as you clear the door and finish by using the “Heel” command to bring the dog back into position at your left side. With some practice, this method can be done quite smoothly and is especially helpful when carrying a bag or other item on the right side.

Whichever method is used, the handler needs to always make sure the dog is clear of the swinging door and should never attempt to pass the dog between themselves and the hinged side of the door. This is dangerous to the dog and could result in an injury, particularly getting a paw or tail caught. Dogs that get pinched in doors can easily develop a fear of going through doors and may try to rush through or even refuse to approach a door altogether.

**Safe placement of your dog while seated**

When the handler is seated, dogs should be placed lying down and out of the way of others. When there is sufficient space, the dog should be under the chair, otherwise, the dog should be lying next to you or directly in front of you. Always consider where the dog will be most out of the way and least likely to be stepped on.

In general, you will encounter two types of seating: stationary and movable. Stationary seating is commonly found in waiting areas and public spaces. The seats may be permanently fastened to the ground or positioned in such a way that there is no need to move the chair as you sit. Movable seating refers to any chair that you need to move in order to position yourself appropriately, such as at a dining table. It is unsafe to place your dog under movable seating as they can easily be startled or pinched as you move the chair.

For stationary seating, dogs can be placed under the seat if space allows. Always check for any hazards before attempting to place your dog underneath. This placement keeps the dog out of harm’s way and decreases the chances of them getting stepped on by others. It also allows the dog to see anything that approaches.

**Use the “Close” command to place your dog under a stationary seat**. Sit toward the front of the chair with your feet and knees apart. Pat the inside of your knee or thigh to invite the dog in as you say “Close”. Your dog should come into your space and begin to turn themselves to face away from you. As this happens, gently place one hand at the dog's collar and the other hand at the dog's rump and help guide him into position as you command “Sit” and “Down”. At this point your dog should be lying partly under the chair, facing out. Push them even farther under by placing your hands in front of their chest. If the dog is wearing a harness, you may use the chest strap to help push the dog under, but do not attempt to pull the dog from the hip or soft groin area. This can be uncomfortable for the dog, and many do not appreciate the intrusion. If your dog lies down out of reach, you’ll need to start over and reset them using the “Close” command.

**Positioning your dog at the dining table (movable seating).** Placing your dog while seated at a dining table will be highly dependent on the available space and layout of the room. As a general rule, your dog should be placed at your side or directly in front of you with their head facing out and body mostly under the table if possible. However, if you are seated with a wall behind you, most dogs will prefer to face the door and/or be able to see if anyone is approaching the table. If space allows, you can achieve a good placement by utilizing the “Side” command. Start by positioning yourself behind the chair and then give the command “Side” as you pass the leash behind you into your right hand. Once the dog is positioned on your right side, move the chair out from under the table and sit down moving in from the right side of the chair. Slide the chair back under and then bring the dog around in front of your knees so the dog is once more on your left side but facing out away from the table. Put the dog into a sit and then into a down. This placement can also be achieved by sending the dog under the table then asking it to turn around to face out before lying down. Booths should be handled in the same way if possible.

\*Note\*During your first few meals with your dog, it is normal for them to be quite unsettled as they figure out the new routine. Expect that you will need to reposition your dog several times. Instructors will be present to assist with this process, and exact positioning of the dog is less important. Once your dog realizes to remain settled during meals, then we will be more particular about positioning.

When exiting any chair, the dog should always exit first. Use “Let’s go” with the leash cuing them out from under the chair or table. Once they are safely out and away from the chair, then you may rise. Your weight holds the chair in position. Do not rise out of the chair if your dog is under it. A dog can easily lift a chair up on their backs and this could cause injury or frighten the dog, making it difficult for you to get them back under a chair the next time. Keep in mind that your dog may have been sleeping and may not pop up immediately. Reach down to touch them and give them a chance to wake up before you stand.

**Stairs**

When walking with your dog on stairs, it is especially important to make sure they are not getting ahead or pulling on the leash. You should continue to reinforce your dog being cautious by having them sit at the beginning of each staircase. When going down, have your dog sit at the top before proceeding down. When going up, have your dog sit at the bottom before proceeding up. You may find that your dog wants to put its front feet up on the first step going up. This is just carryover from their guide training. You can still ask them to sit before proceeding if you choose. It is not necessary to have the dog stop at the end of the staircase, however, if they do get ahead while ascending or descending, you can have them wait while you catch up. If you find yourself having any difficulty with your dog on stairs, please let your instructors know as soon as possible. Undesirable habits can quickly develop into a dangerous situation when it comes to stairs.

**Crate Etiquette and What to Expect Overnight**

By now you should have familiarized yourself with the dog crate in your room. This is where your dog will spend the night. Guide dogs are well accustomed to spending time in a crate. They feel secure and understand that crate time is sleeping time. They do not see it as a punishment or negative in anyway. Using a crate is an excellent way to establish good habits, keep the dog safe and secure, and prevent any unwanted behavior.

* When you're ready to put your dog in the crate, be sure that harness and slip collar have been removed. Open the crate door and say “Kennel” as you point into the crate or gently guide your dog in. Reward with food once your dog is inside, close the door and secure all latches. Get in the habit of tugging on the door to check that it is latched securely.
* There is a soft mat in the crate for your dog to sleep on. Some dogs will dig at the mat or push it into a corner as they get comfortable, others will simply lie down on top of it. You should check the mat daily to make sure it is not being chewed.
* Once your dog is in the crate, there should be minimal need for any further interaction until morning. Most dogs sleep fairly well through the night. However, if your dog does start to whine or vocalize during the night, you can tell it "Quiet" in a low, firm voice. If the dog is very persistent, or unable to settle down after several minutes, you can take the dog outside briefly in case there is an urgent need to relieve itself. Whether they go or not, take them back inside after a few minutes, and back into the crate.
* Many dogs dream when they're sleeping. They may whimper, twitch their paws, or even growl in their sleep. This is totally normal, nothing to be concerned about.
* In the morning, your dog should stay in the crate until the 6:00 a.m. announcement. If you are up prior to 6:00, you can simply ignore your dog as you go about your business. Please be aware that noises carry easily through the dormitory, so close doors gently and keep voices and other noises to a low volume.
* When you hear the announcement, you may take your dog out of the crate and straight out to park. Your dog will be excited to come out in the morning. Use commands like “Sit” and “Stay” as you get their collar and leash on to go out and be sure to have them under good control as you exit your room. After a short first park time, you will feed and water your dog, then come back out for a second park time.

NOTE: If you are training with a new dog at home, you will not have the benefit of the built-in structure of residential class. Though you may not have other guide dog handlers to contend with, many of the above practices will be useful in any situation where you will encounter other humans such as dormitories, office buildings, or apartment complexes. It will be extremely important that you provide good leadership and structure for your dog, develop good heeling practices and safe techniques for navigating doors and stairs. Your instructor will work with you on any specific challenges you may encounter. If you do not plan to use a crate at home, discuss with your instructor the best way to set your dog up for successful overnights.

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