

Learning the art of loose leash walking

01 October, 2020

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One of the biggest reasons people sign up for dog training is to stop their dogs from pulling on the leash.



First day of class, more often than not, students bring (or drag) the dogs in, sit down, and proceed to wind the leash up around their arm. It's an attempt to force good behaviour and silence. What it actually creates is anxiety, reactivity, and....guess what? Pulling.

Now's the time to take a good hard look at our relationship with the leash, why we continue to pull, and what we can do to break our own bad habits.

Why people pull

- A person pulls on the leash to attempt to teach their dog to walk beside them.
- A person pulls on the leash to gain the dog's attention.
- A person pulls on the leash to stop the dog from jumping on a visitor.
- A person pulls on the leash to attempt to correct their dog's inappropriate behaviour, because they feel the dog is embarrassing them.
- A person pulls on the leash because they've been doing it for so long they do it on reflex, even when unnecessary.

Why dogs pull

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- A dog pulls because when he does, you follow him, and forward progress can be made.
- A dog pulls because you've tried to teach her to walk closer to you by yanking her backward. When you jerk the leash it momentarily goes slack, followed by that hard, painful jerk. So now by association, the dog expects the pain will instantly follow, as soon as the leash loosens up. In essence, you've actually conditioned her to constantly pull, to avoid the painful jerk.
- A dog pulls when you use an extendable leash (a Flexi) which is designed to always be taut so even if the dog tries to walk with a slack leash, he can't and therefore gives up trying. Not only is the leash always taut but it varies in length (sometimes three feet, sometimes 15 feet) so the dog never learns what a consistent working distance means.
- A dog pulls when you are frustrated and sometimes yell, making her much less willing to stay closer to you and engage with you. Your frustration stresses her out. The more stressed she is the more erratic and reactive she will be on a walk.

Expect that teaching a dog to walk on a slack leash does not happen overnight. It's going to take a few months of teamwork. Take a pocket full of Cheerios or something he or she likes with you, every time you go out. Make staying around you fun and worthwhile.

Why Loose leash walking should be implemented

Loose leash walking allows for some of the dog's natural instincts to be exercised like stopping and sniffing from time to time, moving in fan pattern ahead of you as long as the leash is slack. Exploration and sniffing are important for a dog's mental health. Remember that it's their walk too and getting from point A to point B in record time, is the last thing on your dog's mind though it may be first and foremost on yours. Remember that a dog's sense of smell is 100,000 times stronger than ours. Dogs live for scent so allow them to experience the world through their nose. Unlike us, [their vision](#) is not very good, something like 20/75, compared to ours, and they have only a limited ability to discern colour.

NOTE: Loose leash walking is not heeling where the dog walks at your left side only, with the ability to match his pace to yours as you speed up or slow down. If your dog has not mastered loose leash walking, good luck teaching the more structured task of Heeling.

How to get started

- To start off, find an empty parking lot where you and your dog have less distraction to deal with.
- Give your dog the full extent of the leash (six feet, no shorter) and let her sniff around. If she pulls towards something, STOP! Do not move forward. Do not pull her and do not allow her to pull you.
- Almost always she will look back at you to see why you've stopped. Call to her in a happy, upbeat voice. If she's prone to

jumping up, avoid eye contact to allow her to just focus on the task at hand. If she comes back, reward and praise. If she's still distracted, simply turn in the opposite direction and (without pulling) start walking the other way. She'll start to follow and you can drop a few Cheerios behind your foot for encouragement. Think of the kids game Red Light/Green Light, only in this case, your only move when the leash is slack. You always stop when the leash goes taut.

- If the dog doesn't seem to hear you and is focused on sniffing or listening to something in the environment, give him a few moments. Dogs are not good at multitasking. If a dog is using one sense (like his nose) his brain actually cuts out most of his other senses. A gentle touch will usually bring his focus back to you.

Making it fun

Dogs love to hear you count. It's something I discovered while teaching class, helping students build duration into their "watch me" cue. My guess is that, unlike regular human speech which must seem like monotone mush to a dog's ears, counting is simple, crisp, and consistent. It never varies so eventually a dog learns to recognize the individual sounds. Let's take this method a little further and apply it to loose leash walking.

Start your dog walking by your side and count "One", "Two", "Three". On "Three" provide a reward. Repeat, repeat, repeat...The process is continuous just like learning to waltz (1, 2, 3, 1, 2,3, 1, 2, 3...).

Make sure you are counting to the dog, nice and clear, with a bit more emphasis on the "Three". Think of the sound you make when pushing a child on a swing. That's the kind of enthusiasm your "Three" should embody. Continue this method and very quickly your dog starts to associate "Three" as the signal that his treat will follow. Counting will keep your dog in exactly the right position for short stretches at a time. Once your dog performs well you can build in more duration by adding a longer and longer pause between "two" and "three". Once your dog is fairly consistent, you can drop the counting and use for times on a walk, when he or she is having trouble staying close.

Dangers of the "Jerk" method of walking

Jerking the dog to gain their attention or compel them to stop pulling, has many unwanted side effects.

One hard jerk on a leash, or small ones over time, can damage your dog's thyroid gland, trachea, neck, and back. It often results in whiplash and in fact, some veterinarians have suggested that blindness and poor eyesight in dogs may be a result of equipment hindering blood circulation to their brain.

Another negative consequence is that dogs feel choked and/or pain, from a jerk, when approaching another human or dog as their

owners try to restrain them. They then may associate that pain with strange people and other dogs, in which case you're actually teaching your dog to be fearful and aggressive.

Where possible use a harness for walking. In fact, small dogs should always be walked with a harness. They should never be walked using a collar. If you are using a collar for a large breed dog, ensure it's as wide as possible. There are some great harnesses out there for large breed dogs with a good heavy-duty handle, sewn in, right above the shoulder area. Grasping the handle, just before a dog reacts to something, saves your joints, his neck and signals what you expect of him much more effectively.

Learning for puppies

Remember that puppies, no matter their size, are still only babies. They have little in the way of focus and concentration. Don't force a puppy to work for longer than they are able. To start a puppy off with loose leash walking, keep the walks short, maybe 10 minutes at three months of age, adding on another five minutes, for each month.

Learning for adult dogs

When you and your dog have mastered loose leash walking in that parking lot, that's the time to try out your new skills in a normal, dynamic environment. Always keep some rewards in your pocket but once you're getting good solid consistency you can start rewarding less often. A varying, unpredictable schedule for rewarding, develops the best performance.

THE DOG BLOG is a great resource for tips on training and canine well being. Got questions or a topic in mind? Let me know via the comments box. I would love to hear from you.

Additional Resources:

- 1) *My Dog Pulls. What do I do?* by Turid Rugaas
- 2) *Teach the Leash, Loose Leash Walking*, by Pamela Dennison
- 3) *Control Unleashed, Reactive to Relaxed*, by Leslie McDevitt

Comments



Meg Thompson 03 October, 2020

I've just adopted a four-week-old, mastiff puppy. How soon should I start teaching him walking skills? Also, can you recommend a harness brand and style for this breed.

Gregory Wilson 03 October, 2020



What are your thoughts on walking my dog off-leash, assuming he gets very good with the loose lease walking technique?



Carmen Bengham *03 October, 2020*

My dog seems to have no issues with socializing at the off-leash dog park but is often aggressive towards other dogs when walking her on-leash around my neighborhood. Is there any way to teach her better on-leash manners?

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