

Loose Leash Walking

There are many ways of teaching loose leash walking and you may want to use several of the methods below. The most important thing is that, while you are teaching this skill, you must NEVER allow the dog to pull on the leash. We understand that this is hard because you may want to take your dog for a walk before he is fully proficient at not pulling. Use one or more of the methods explained here to train your dog and if you must walk him on leash before he understands not to pull, use a walking tool that helps to prevent pulling (see section at the end of this handout on “Walking Tools”).

Setting up for Success

Start in an area with few or no distractions. You won't be able to hold your dog's attention if there are other pets, children, squirrels, rabbits, etc., running around.

Use a flat collar while training your dog, rather than a choke collar, prong collar or head halter.

Make sure your dog understands the clicker game (see handout “Getting Started with the Clicker”).

Make your “loose leash” criteria very clear -- reward for NO tension on the leash, and do not allow your dog to pull “a little bit” because it is too difficult for the dog to learn the difference between pulling a little and pulling a lot. A good sign that the leash is loose is that the leash clip is hanging straight down from your dog's collar.

Getting Started

Start your training session with your dog in a sitting position at your side with a loose leash. As you step forward, slap your thigh to encourage her to walk with you. Click and treat (C/T) every one or two steps as long as your dog is not pulling.

Keep your dog's interest by using your voice, slapping your thigh, or making high-pitched sounds. C/T as long as the leash is loose. Anytime the leash tightens, stop moving. Get your dog's attention back on you, and then continue walking. If your dog continues to pull, you probably need to move to a less distracting environment.

Use a cue such as “with me” or “let's go” when you change directions.

Gradually increase the number of steps you take before C/Ting.

Method 1: Red Light – Green Light

Begin walking a normal pace with your dog on leash. C/T for a few steps of non-pulling. If she darts out to the end of the leash, stop (don't pull back on the leash, just stop). Wait for your dog to ease up or look back at you (be patient). At that second, click and wait for your dog to come to you for the treat. Take a couple of steps. If your dog stays close and doesn't pull, C/T while you walk. Give lots of praise and “happy” talk while she walks with you. If she tightens the leash again, stop. As long as the distractions are kept to a minimum, most clicker-trained dogs will catch on.

Method 2: Choose to Heel

Work off-leash inside your home or in a safe, enclosed fenced area (like a tennis court). Walk around without saying a word to your dog. Every time she comes up to you, click, praise and treat. If she continues to walk with you, talk to her with a “happy” voice (use a high pitched “good dog”), and click and treat often. If she walks away after getting the treat, continue walking and wait for her to

come to you again. If she totally ignores you, take a break and try again in a less-distracting area (the smells on the ground may be more interesting than you!). Next time, work with her before her regular feeding time (when she's hungry), and let her know you've got a delicious treat.

Method 3: Magnetizing

With your dog on leash, show her that you've got a great treat. As she approaches, walk backward, making sure you're in a safe area where you won't trip over furniture, and use your "happy" voice to coax her to follow. She'll most likely follow you; C/T every couple of steps at first. If she walks away from you and reaches the end of the leash, **stop** and use your voice or slap your thigh to coax her to follow you again. Continue walking backward with your dog following you until she stays with you reliably, then turn around so you are facing the same direction as your dog. Walk forward with your dog walking beside you, C/Ting frequently at first. Gradually require more steps with you before she gets a C/T.

Method 4: Walking towards a goal

Place a treat or toy that your dog really likes on the floor. Stand 15-20 feet from the goodie with your dog on leash, sitting at your side. Begin walking toward the goodie. If the leash remains loose, continue walking. If your dog lunges toward the goodie, stop. When the dog releases tension on the leash, continue walking forward. Repeat until your dog is able to walk to the goodie without pulling on the leash. The treat or toy is your dog's reward – click as she gets it. If your dog is very treat motivated and continues to lunge, try a lower value treat, such as a dog biscuit, and try it when she's not hungry. If you don't want to encourage your dog to pick up food off the floor, use a different temptation, such as a toy, a person or an open door to the fenced backyard.

Tips:

- When you walk your dog, change directions frequently. This makes you more interesting to your dog and encourages her to pay attention. Give your cue word before you change direction and avoid yanking on the leash.
- Remember to start in a place with few distractions and gradually work up to locations where there are lots of distractions.
- Loose leash walking is a more relaxed behavior than a formal "heel." Heeling requires that the dog be intensely focused on you. This is very tiring for the dog and doesn't allow him the freedom to sniff and explore which is important for his mental and emotional well being. If you would like to teach a heel command, use it only when you need extra control – when crossing the street or walking in a crowd.
- With a puppy, these methods will work fairly quickly (if you are consistent). If you are working with an adult dog that has been "successfully" pulling for months or even years, this is going to take longer. Be patient.

Walking Tools

These tools may prevent your dog from pulling as hard (though some dogs do learn to pull even while wearing these tools), but they will NOT teach your dog to walk on a loose leash. Use them while you are working on loose leash walking to prevent setbacks in your training resulting from successful pulling. You may have to experiment with several tools to find the one that works the best for you and your dog. You may also need help getting the tool properly fitted.

- Head Halters: Head halters are a collar with a strap that goes around the dog's nose and the leash is attached under his chin. When the dog pulls, the head halter causes his nose to be turned back toward you, making it physically difficult for him to pull. There are several different brands of head halters (Gentle Leader™, Halti™, Canny Collar™ and Snoot Loop™, to name a few). Head halters must be properly fitted, introduced gradually, and used appropriately. See our handout, "How to Use a Head Halter."
- Front-hook Harnesses: As with head halters, the leash on a front-hook harness fastens in front of the dog's chest, so that when he pulls, he is turned back toward you. There are a few different brands of front-hook harnesses, including the Sensation/Sensible™ harness and the Easy Walk™ harness.
- No-pull Harness: These harnesses are designed to create pressure behind the dog's front legs, or around his chest when he pulls, making pulling uncomfortable for him. There are several brands of no pull harnesses including Sporn™ and Holt™.