

LOOSE-LEASH WALKING



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If your dog pulls on leash, walking him can literally be a pain – for both you and your dog. Your arms and shoulders hurt, you can develop bursitis, or you could slip and fall. You could also cause your dog long-term damage if you are using equipment around his neck; chronic pulling on the leash can result in tracheal collapse, whiplash, eye damage, or even hypothyroidism. Collars should only be used to hold tags.

Loose-leash walking (LLW) means having your dog walk with you on a leash that has no tension. A retractable leash is not a good tool to help you teach your dog this behaviour, as it provides constant tension. I also recommend using a harness, preferably a front-buckle harness like the Easy Walk or the Freedom Harness. This takes the pressure off of your dog's neck and will give you more control and comfort.

So why do dogs pull? Because it works. Whenever they pull, they get to go where they want.

Practise loose-leash walking by first slowly building the behaviour of staying by your side. Start in your home, where there are minimal distractions, and without a leash. Decide which side you would like your dog to walk on, and have some kibble ready in your hand. When you have your dog's attention, take one step and immediately feed your dog a piece of kibble at your knee that is closest to your dog, and then repeat a few times.

Start varying the number of steps before feeding, as well as the speed at which you are walking. Finally start changing the direction you are walking in to keep your dog interested and attuned to you.

When you stop walking, ask your dog for a sit and be sure to reinforce that randomly. When varying your steps, alternate between easy and difficult; one step equals one treat, then two steps, then seven steps, then five steps, back to one step, etc.

Next, attach the leash and be sure to keep it loose. Try to keep your hand anchored to your body so that you avoid pulling or, better yet, opt for a hands-free leash.

Once your dog has gotten the hang of LLW, you can introduce a visual cue, like tapping the side of your leg, or a verbal cue, like "let's go" or "close" or "with me." Say the cue just as your dog is walking politely with you, and then reward her in the correct position (by your knee). Repeat, using the cue each time you notice her performing the behaviour. Eventually you can say it earlier so that you're cueing the behaviour rather than naming it.

As you practise this, remember that if your dog cannot walk on a loose leash in your home, then he's unlikely to do it outside. When you're outdoors, you will have to compete with exciting sights, sounds, and smells. But don't worry. If your dog is interested in a certain smell or a person, use it as an environmental reward, and allow him to investigate or say hello as long as the leash is loose.

Now take it on the road! It may be helpful to let your dog out in the backyard to burn off some steam before going outside. You should also give yourself some extra time when working on LLW, as you may be making many

stops. Remember to use treats or a squeaky toy outdoors instead of kibble; it's always better to match the value of the treat to the level of difficulty or distraction in the environment.

When starting off, pick out a short route so you have fewer distractions to contend with. For example, walk back and forth the length of the next four houses. The goal is to make it easy for your dog and to set her up to succeed. You can increase the distance as you and your dog improve.

To practise the behaviour, think of the game Red Light/Green Light. Every time your dog pulls and creates tension, think Red Light and stop. Once there is slack in the leash, think Green Light and move forward. If your dog refuses to move, you can turn 180 degrees and slowly start walking the other way. As soon as your dog is coming up alongside of you, immediately reinforce him in position. You want your dog to think that walking beside you is the greatest place to be!

A fun exercise to practise is the figure eight. Imagine there is a figure eight outside, and walk along that image with your dog. Anytime you come to a turning point, make sure to reward your dog in position; this keeps her focused on you when there's a slight change in the direction you're walking.

Loose-leash walking is one of the most important skills to teach your dog. It gives both you and your dog the opportunity to go out, get exercise, and enjoy each other's company. Engage with your dog (i.e., stay off your cell phone), and reward any attention he gives you and all good behaviour. Be patient and remember that practice makes perfect. Keep your training sessions short and enjoyable for you both.

Happy Training!