

Loose Leash Walking

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Why Dogs Pull and How to Get Them to Stop!

Dogs pull and strain against leashes because they don't know how to walk on leash any other way. I can't repeat this often enough: They need help learning how to move when attached to a leash. They are not stubborn. They are not defiant. They are uneducated and being asked to move in a restricted way nature didn't intend.

That said, I've found developing a relaxed loose leash walk is one of the hardest things many dog owners teach their pets. Here are some tips that can help.

Get a Calm Start

Many dogs get overexcited as soon as they see the leash. Step 1 is to teach your dog to sit calmly at your side while you clip the leash onto her collar or harness.

If your dog knows how to sit, skip to the next section.

- If not, place a tasty treat in your hand and put your hand right in front of your dog's nose. Keeping your hand very close to the nose, lift your hand up and forward slowly toward the dog's eyes, so that her nose follows your hand upward. Lifting the head causes the dog to shift its balance backward and sit down. When your dog sits, say "Yes" to mark the right behavior and give your dog the treat. Repeat several times, rewarding each sit with your treat.
- Now it's time to teach the word "Sit". As you lure your dog with the treated hand, say "Sit". Reward the sit with your treat. Repeat several times.

Once your dog knows how to sit on cue:

- Say "Sit". As soon as your dog sits, say "Yes" to mark the right behavior. Clip on your leash and reward your dog with a tasty treat. Unclip your leash, move to a new spot and repeat several times. Your goal is to teach your dog to calmly sit while the leash is attached. This sets the stage for a calm walk.

Begin to Move:

I like to teach a method called "Building Steps" to teach dogs that the best place to walk is right beside their owner. You're going to reward your dog every few steps at first to build the habit to walk close to your side. Over time, you'll take more steps between rewards until you can finally fade them completely out of the picture.

- Start with your dog in a calm sit at your side. Clip on the leash and give your dog a cue that lets them know you are going to start to move. Mine is "Let's go". Take one step. If your dog moves with you, say "Yes" to mark the right behavior and reward your dog with a treat while you keep moving.

- With puppies and dogs learning a leash walk for the first time, take 3 steps, then use your “Yes” and reward your dog while you keep moving. When your dog can follow with the leash loose for 3 steps, start adding steps. Move to 5 steps between treats, then to 10 steps, then to half a short block, etc. Any time you lose your dog’s attention, decrease steps until they can stay with you, and then start adding steps again.
- Alternate periods of this structured “Walk and Treat” behavior with stops where you let your dog sniff, do their business, and relax. When you start moving again, practice your “Walk and Treat”.

Problem Solving:

If your dog begins to pull and tug after every treat, here are a few techniques that can help:

- Adjust your timing. Stop moving. Ask your dog to sit. Give your “Let’s Go” cue and take a few steps, giving your “Yes” marker and reward ONLY when your dog is moving calmly by your side. Repeat as needed until your dog learns that you won’t move forward or reward them UNLESS they are walking calmly beside you.
- Begin changing directions. Each time your dog lunges out ahead of you, call your dog’s name, turn 180-degrees and walk away from them, keeping the leash as loose as possible. Your dog should turn to see where her funny human is going and begin to follow you. When she catches up, mark the right behavior with a “Yes” and a reward. Continue walking and rewarding. Repeat as needed to keep your dog’s attention focused on you.

If you are calm and consistent, most dogs can learn to keep the leash loose in a few weeks of practice.