



Walking on a Loose Leash: Impossible?

For success, you'll need to train your dog – and yourself. Here are the tools you'll need

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Dogs love going on walks, but excursions aren't much fun for you if your pet makes a habit of pulling. In addition to getting a sore arm or elbow from the constant tugging, you risk losing control of your dog if he's constantly straining at the end of the lead. If you have a large dog, you also risk bodily injury – just ask anyone whose massive mutt has suddenly charged off and dragged them to the ground.

Why do dogs pull? Because it works. If your dog wants to explore a tempting bush or fire hydrant and you let him pull you over to it, he's reached his goal and learned that pulling gets it something he wants. The more often he pulls and gets a reward for it, the more ingrained the behavior becomes. Many dogs also have a built-in instinct to pull when they feel tension on the lead. In particular, Siberian huskies and other northern breeds, which for generations have been bred to pull sleds, can become champion leash-pullers.

But walks are a necessity for many dogs, and they should be enjoyable for both dog and owner. According to Katherine Houpt, VMD, PhD, the James Law Professor of Behavior Medicine at Cornell University's College of Veterinary Medicine, teaching the dog to walk reliably on a loose leash is the way to achieve this balance. "You want the dog to have the freedom to explore within the radius of the leash but not be pulling so much that it's not comfortable for the walker," she explains.

How to Get Started

- 1) Use the right tools: Use a regular buckled collar and a six-foot leash for walking the dog. Lunge lines and retractable leashes don't provide enough control; in addition, says Dr. Houpt, those flexi-leashes exert a constant tension on the leash, which makes it hard to teach a dog not to pull.
- 2) Establish manners before the walk: If your dog goes crazy when he sees the leash and you attached it while he's cavorting around in glee, that's a mistake. Now you are taking an out-of-control animal on a walk – and it's almost impossible to expect a dog in this state to show good manners. Instead, implement a "nothing in life is free" approach. Ask your dog to sit and stay before you attach his leash. Reward him for sitting with a treat or verbal praise, and don't clip on the leash until his rear is planted. If he's trembling in barely-contained excitement, that's okay. He needs to learn that certain behaviors get the leash while others don't. Continue this approach when you get to the front door – the door doesn't open until he sits and stays.
- 3) Train yourself: Many trainers are fond of saying that it takes two to pull on a leash – the dog and the person holding the other end. It's important that you commit to never pulling or yanking the dog on-leash or using the leash to guide or direct him. Your goal is to maintain a slack lead at all times. If you find that you have trouble doing this, consider

- attaching the leash to your belt or using a waist leash specifically designed for this purpose.
- 4) Set your dog up to succeed: Before you begin your training, give your dog a vigorous romp or good ball-throwing session. If he's a little bit tired, he'll be less likely to be rambunctious on the leash. Next, start working in a low-distraction environment: your backyard, an empty parking lot or even indoors. As he begins to grasp the basics of loose-leash walking, slowly increase the distractions until you eventually work back up to his normal routine.
 - 5) Be consistent: Once you decide to train for loose-leash walking, be completely consistent. "You need to one hundred percent commitment," notes Suzanne Clothier, author of *Bones Would Rain From the Sky* and a dog trainer and lecturer. "You don't let the dog ever get away with pulling. It's like housebreaking – you need to decide if you're going to be committed to that."

Training Techniques

For the "stop-go" method, "You want to teach your dog that it's not worth his trouble to go to the end of the leash," explains dog trainer Melissa Alexander, the author of *Click for Joy*. When your dog pulls so hard that the leash gets taut, just stop in your tracks and freeze. At some point, your dog will look back at you to see why you aren't moving, and the leash will slacken slightly. As soon as it does, praise your dog (click if you're using a clicker), offer a treat and resume your walk. Repeat as often as needed, making sure you stop any time your dog puts the slightest tension on the leash. The one exception is if your dog is pulling toward something specific; in this case, use the "environmental rewards" techniques described below.

It's important to continue offering reinforcement when the leash is loose, such as when he's walking by your side, says Alexander. "If you forget to maintain a high rate of reinforcement for staying in the correct position, your dog will quickly figure out that going to the end of the leash and back is the best way to get a treat."

Reward a Loose Leash

In this approach, you reinforce your dog for slackening the leash. "Sometimes you can cure a puller easily with one simple rule for yourself: Every time the leash gets slack, I will click and treat," says Karen Pryor, the author of *Getting Started: Clicker Training for Dogs*. Take your dog for a walk but tie the leash to your belt or waist. When the dog happens to let the leash go slack, for whatever reason – stopping to sniff a bush, scratch, or relieve himself – click and give him a treat. He'll soon start to realize that a loose leash brings on good things, while a taut leash gets nothing. For some dogs, this method works almost instantly, says Pryor: "By the end of a 10-minute walk, you may have a reformed character."

If your dog is pulling for a specific reason – to sniff a rock, greet people, mark, etc. – you'll need to teach him that he can get what he wants only by walking on a loose leash, and that he'll lose what he wants if the leash gets tight. For this technique, allow your dog to walk toward his intended target as long as the leash is loose. The moment he pulls it tight, say "Whoops!" and immediately walk back to the starting point. To avoid pulling on the leash, you may need to break into a quick run; your dog will instinctively give chase. Allow your dog to start toward the target again, but repeat the change of direction as soon as he pulls on the leash. "Think of environment reward as just that – rewards," says Alexander. "If the dog does what you want, she gets to do what she wants."

Management Requires Time & Tools

Teaching your dog to walk with a loose leash takes time and consistency. Until he's trained, the following equipment options can help.

Clothier suggests using a collar and leash during no-pull training but switching to a standard harness with pulling must be tolerated for some reason. "There are times when you don't have 20 minutes to go down the front steps." She says. "In that case, put a harness on the dog. They learn that if the body harness is on, they are allowed to pull. That helps if you're running late, or if your dog walker doesn't follow the rules."

A no-pull harness is also an option. This type of harness has the leash attachment ring at the dog's chest instead of on his back. If he pulls, he'll be turned back toward the owner, which may discourage pulling since he can't get where he wants to go.

Various head halters are on the market today, including versions by Gentle Leader, Halti and Snoot Loop, and they work on the principle that, if you guide the dog's head, the body will follow suit. The leash attaches to the halter at the dog's chin; when he pulls, his head is turned. In some cases, simply using the halter for every walk can solve the dog's pulling problem for good.

Some owners believe their dogs need more serious deterrents than those listed above, such as choke chains and prong collars, but these must be used with caution. "Choke chains can be misused. Usually if you hear the dog panting against it, it's not being used correctly," says Dr. Houpt, who is board certified by the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists. "And I don't like the prong collar, because it does produce pain, and some people feel it leads to more inter-dog aggression. But some dogs are so big and strong that that's all that will work, so I'm not going to condemn them outright."