

The Challenge of Loose-Leash Walking: Strategies and Techniques

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Spark, C. (2008). The challenge of loose-leash walking: Strategies and techniques. *Journal of Applied Companion Animal Behavior*, 2(1), 7–11.

Walking on a loose leash is one of the harder things to teach people to teach their dogs. It seems to fly in the face of the basic human and canine instincts that are called into play as soon as a leash is clipped on and a door opened to the outside world. Dog pulls forward; human pulls back. Everything about loose-leash walking makes it a potential source of mutual frustration for human–canine walking partners. So it is not surprising that various methods of addressing its particular challenges have been developed.

In this article, I consider briefly why loose-leash walking can be so challenging, and then describe some methods that I have found effective in training my own dogs and helping other people to train theirs. I also look at ways of tackling common difficulties that dogs have in learning this behavior, and consider how pent-up energy and poor impulse control can factor into the mix. Finally, I note solutions for a few technical and attitudinal problems that handlers often experience, and emphasize the importance of a flexible, open-minded and supportive approach in working with determined pullers at either end of the leash.

From the Dog's Point of View

Maintaining a walking pace alongside a person appears to be quite beyond the comprehension of an untrained dog. Why walk slowly and in a straight line when the canine body yearns to move free and at its own pace, following a zigzagging abundance of sensory delight? To a dog, the experience of the leash is just one of many sensory experiences. Compared with the world that the dog accesses through his senses, the human at the other end of the leash is basically irrelevant—unless the dog learns otherwise.

When a dog pulls on leash, it is likely that one or more of the following holds true: he doesn't know what is required of him; he is physically or emotionally unable to perform the task (because he is too excited or frustrated, for example); he is confused about what is expected; he is not ready to perform at the level asked of him; or he finds something else more rewarding.

In addition, a tight leash does not communicate to an untrained dog that he is walking too fast. On the contrary, it may excite him (by association with something exciting that he smells or sees ahead), and make him pull harder. It can also be an effective way for the dog to ascertain, without actually looking, the whereabouts of his walking partner. When the leash is tight, the handler can't be far away.

Teaching the Basics

What the leash means to a dog, and how well he responds to it while walking, is all a matter of education. Dogs need to be taught, and taught well, how to walk on a loose leash. Otherwise they will teach themselves to pull, aided and abetted by the human at the other end of the leash.

Dog training professionals teach loose-leash walking every day of the week, and are always trying to come up with better ways of doing so. In my experience, methods that are underpinned by an understanding of learning principles and canine physiological responses (particularly the oppositional reflex) are particularly effective (Ailsby, 2000; Ganley, 2006; Parsons, 2005; Rugaas, 2005; Tillman, 2000). The following instructions (drawn largely from Ailsby, 2000) provide an example of one such approach.

1. Begin in a quiet, spacious part of the house. Choose a time when you are calm and focused, and the dog is hungry (motivated by food rewards) and well exercised (able to focus). Have plenty of small, delicious treats, and a clicker or verbal marker, at the ready.

A note on equipment: For this exercise, the dog should be wearing a flat buckle collar and 6-foot leash. Front clip harnesses (particularly for dogs with trachea damage) are useful alternatives. Retractable leashes are not suitable, since they reinforce pulling by remaining taut all the time. The dog learns to associate going where he wants to go with the feeling of a taut leash (Miller, 2004). Pinch and prong collars are not compatible with this method of teaching loose-leash walking, and may cause pain or discomfort that makes a pulling problem worse.

2. Wrap the leash around your hands and keep your hands at your belt buckle. Remember the basic rule of loose-leash walking: *Loose leash* → *go forward*. *Tight leash* → *go nowhere*, *EVER!* Loose leash means the snap is hanging straight down from the dog's collar.

3. Walk around slowly, marking (click or "Yes!") and treating your dog for being near you and keeping the leash loose, about 50 times or more.

4. The loose leash itself is the only cue needed for the behavior. If the leash is loose, move forward with your dog. If she pulls, stop and back up.

5. Give your dog a focal point, such as a large treat, or a favorite toy. Start so far away from it that your dog doesn't show any interest in it. Walk towards the focal point, marking and treating for a loose leash. If the dog does not pull at all on the way to the focal point, give her the treat or allow her to play with the toy. If she pulls, stop and back up until you are out of the focal zone, mark and treat 10 times once the leash is loose. Then start again, walking towards the focal point.

6. Many trainers find that the loose leash itself is the only cue they need. Some use a

verbal cue such as "Close," "With me," or "Let's go." If you decide to use a verbal cue, wait until your dog is walking well on a loose leash before you introduce it.

7. Practice, practice, practice! Start where it is easiest for your dog, and build up slowly, in short sessions, repeating many, many times over. Practice in different places, with increasing distraction. For example, practice in other rooms of the house, then outside in the back yard, then in front of the house, then nearby in the neighborhood, and so on, taking care not to increase the degree of difficulty too sharply by practicing where there are many distractions. Plan on taking months, not days or weeks, to perfect this—try not to be in a hurry.

8. As your dog progresses, use naturally occurring distractions of appropriate strength to help to solidify the behavior. Practice with anything stationary that your dog wants to get to: something interesting to smell, a tree, fire hydrant, a friend or family member (standing still), the dog's dinner bowl. Anything your dog wants to get to can be used as a reinforcer. It is important to mark and reinforce the loose-leash position frequently, making it worthwhile for your dog to stay near you.

Troubleshooting

It takes skill, consistency, time and patience to really establish loose-leash walking, both for the handler and for the dog. Some common difficulties can be tackled as follows (Ailsby, 2000; Ganley, 2006).

If the dog is too interested in the focal point, the handler can back up and start even further away from it. Similarly, if the dog starts yo-yoing (coming with the handler when she backs up, then going to the end of the leash when she starts walking again), more distance is needed between the handler and the focal point. If the dog pulls so hard that the handler cannot back up, it can help to lower one's center of gravity and stand more firmly, or to work in a less exciting area. If the dog is very distracted and tries to pull the handler all over the place, it may help to find one thing that really attracts the dog's attention and work towards that. It is

important to manipulate the level of distraction throughout, setting the dog up for success by working up gradually through increasing levels of distraction.

Two other techniques can also be tried to good effect. Firstly, if the handler is overly goal oriented and the dog is picking up on this, practicing with an unhurried attitude of “nowhere to go, nothing to do” can be helpful. This can be done by the handler shifting his own attention off the focal point, and changing direction by walking in squares or zigzags, or putting in a few U-turns. The second technique uses the sensation of the tightened leash as a cue for the dog to reorient to the handler (Parsons, 2005). The handler marks the moment any tension is felt on the leash, and reinforces the dog’s turning back to the handler (or partial approximations of this). This *aikido*-like maneuver uses the energy of the problem against itself, rather than fighting it head-on. It can be a particularly effective strategy when the handler is overly focused on stopping the pulling behavior, and is getting frustrated by a lack of progress.

Energy and Impulsivity in the Mix

Pent-up energy can factor prominently into difficulties with loose-leash walking, and may need to be addressed before even trying to teach the skill. But this can be a catch-22 situation, if walking on leash is the only form of outside exercise the dog gets. In such cases, it can be helpful to take the focus off loose-leash walking temporarily, and explore ways of tiring the dog out within the constraints of his particular circumstances. For example, driving the dog to the dog park rather than being towed there can be a good option in the early stages of teaching a wildly energetic dog how to walk on a loose leash. For dogs who cannot be safely off leash in public areas, other strategies include playing active games such as “fetch” or “hide and seek” in the house or yard; borrowing or renting a neighbor’s fenced yard; and using a long drag line in an unfenced area well away from traffic, other dogs and people. In addition, the power of the “daily sniff” cannot be overemphasized in designing ways to help dogs to shed excess energy. Ways of doing this include making dogs

hunt for their meals by hiding kibble or small dishes of food around the house or yard; playing “find it” games with them; or giving them “free sniff” time in an area full of interesting smells.

En route to loose-leash walking, dogs with poor impulse control also need to learn self control. Building impulse control can be achieved gradually through simple daily routines (such as having to sit or lie calmly before meals are fed or doors are opened); regular “quiet time” away from stimulation; self-control games (see, for example, Ganley, 2006, p. 80); and detailed protocols such as those recommended by Overall (2007) and McDevitt (2007).

Novice handlers sometimes get the impression that progress in loose-leash walking will occur readily if basic training steps are followed, but this is not necessarily the reality for dogs with energy and impulse-control issues. The process can take months or even years, depending on the dog’s age and history. In such cases, having realistic expectations about how long it can actually take to establish loose-leash walking as a reliable behavior can help the handlers pace the training process and stay the course.

At the Human End of the Leash

It is just as easy for handlers as for dogs to pull on the leash, both deliberately and inadvertently. Handlers may need to become more aware of their own tendency to pull on leash, in their attempts to keep control or as an expression of stress or anxiety. Once the leash position has been grasped, it can be helpful to provide a visual reminder for forgetful moments by tying a ribbon to the leash, so that it touches the floor when the leash is loose. If the ribbon loses contact with the floor, the handler stops and backs up. Using a video camera to review progress, or inviting a training partner with a clicker to mark correct leash positions, can also be helpful.

Another common problem for handlers is their reluctance to maintain a sufficiently high rate of reinforcement. An effective way of addressing this is to practice loose-leash walking beside a line of objects spaced closely together

(12–18 inches), marking and reinforcing at each object. As the handler gets good at this, she is in turn rewarded by clear improvement in the dog's interest in staying close and looking to her: a win–win situation all round.

Finally, the mindset of the handler can be a significant obstacle to teaching loose-leash walking effectively. It takes time, hard work and patience to establish the behavior. For novice handlers in particular, it can be easy to become frustrated or disheartened and give up prematurely. Unrealistic expectations are a major source of frustration, so realistic goal setting is important here. People have different degrees of skill and experience in teaching the desired behavior. Individual dogs learn at different rates. Puppies learn quickly, but take time to mature and are distracted easily. Adult dogs may learn more slowly, depending on previous training experience and whether they have additional problems, such as a lack of relationship with the handler, poor impulse control, or on-leash reactivity. For these dogs, loose-leash walking may take two or three years of consistent effort to establish reliably—and, for some, may not be a realistic proposition at all.

Practical support and encouragement may be needed while training loose-leash walking.

Tracking progress, noting achievements and not allowing them to be eclipsed by what has yet to be accomplished are all important. Keeping a progress log can be useful here. Training with a friend can serve the same purpose, as it is often easier for someone on the outside to see the progress being made. While training, working in short sessions and avoiding training when tired or stressed are important. Self-calming techniques, such as diaphragmatic breathing, positive visualization and singing or humming while walking, can be useful too, and taking a complete break from training for a few days is always an option if tension or boredom is starting to mount. Keeping the mind as loose as the leash goes a long way towards solving problems that might crop up.

Conclusion

Although it is one of the more demanding training tasks, teaching loose-leash walking is well worth the time and effort involved. Making the goal of each individual session humble and realistic, experimenting with the strategies and learning aids described here and celebrating achievements all contribute to making steady progress at both ends of the leash. Handler and dog can walk out together as partners, not adversaries, and, as a consequence, their world is a bigger and more enjoyable place.

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