



Resources for Pet Owners



Let's Go!! Getting Your Dog to Walk on a Loose Leash

By Pat Miller

Walking politely on a leash is probably one of the most challenging behaviors we ask our dogs to learn. Dogs pull on the leash because we are slow and boring and because pulling seems to get them where they want to go. In other words, pulling is rewarded! By the time most dogs get to a training class, pulling has been rewarded so much that it has become a deeply ingrained habit. The sooner you stop rewarding your dog for pulling, the easier it will be to teach him loose-leash walking.

For now, you will need to think of walks with Fido as training games rather than exercise or destination outings. Keep sessions short at first so you don't relent and let him pull just so you can get to the dog park, etc. Until he is good at walking politely, drive to his off-leash play areas or other destinations, practice polite walking and let him get his exercise and play. Training loose-leash walking should not take the place of normal exercise. Practice after Fido has a good hard play session in your yard or home.

How to Start

The best way to lay a good foundation for loose-leash walking is by starting without the leash. In a quiet place with few distractions, walk around with your dog. Every time your dog is walking near you, mark the behavior (with "yes") and treat. He will eventually decide that "near you" is a great place to be. Then you can start using a verbal "let's walk" or "let's go" cue to let him know what the behavior is called. GRADUALLY increase the distraction over a period of time until you see you are getting a high percentage of the wanted behavior.

Lots of unruly leash behavior starts before you even attach Fido's leash to his collar. Do not make the "walk" as the most exciting event that he may ever have. Make this a "life reward" by training your dog that a walk on the leash is only accomplished when he sits politely and waits to have the leash clipped to the collar. Do not reinforce jumping, barking, and over-excited behavior prior to asking for a calm, loose-leash stroll.

Stay by Me

You will need a mega-supply of treats (high value). At first, this exercise is a very treat-intensive one. Be sure you have plenty of high value treats with you. Now that you have practiced without the leash and the dog is not overly excited about going for a walk, just step forward as you say "let's go". If Fido rushes ahead and hits the end of his leash, stop. Don't jerk, just stand still and wait. Sooner or later Fido will look back at you to see why you aren't following. The instant he looks back at you, mark the behavior with "yes" and treat. Hold the treat in front of you or at your side. If he pulls out ahead and hits the end of the leash, stop and wait until he looks at you. Repeat the sequence. Ideally, you can keep your dog at your side as you treat and walk. Walking beside you is the most rewarding experience that he has ever had.

You can also do a lot of directional changes to keep Fido from getting bored. If Fido begins to get ahead of you, turn around and go the other way. Bingo! Now he is behind you and, as he turns to

hurry and catch up, you have lots of praise and rewards waiting at your side. Caution: the intent here is NOT to jerk him when you go the other way. Just a gentle pressure should be enough for the dog to realize that you have changed direction and he needs to catch up with you. Make it HIS decision to do so – do not pull, tug or jerk.

If He Still Keeps Pulling

If your dog doesn't pay any attention to you and continues to pull excessively on the leash, the dog may be fearful or over-stimulated by the environment. He is either too distracted by all the surroundings and activities or is too stressed to think about eating treats. You MUST try getting his attention focused back on you. This can be done by doing simple exercises (look, sit, down, etc.) that get rewarded when the dog pays attention to you. If that doesn't work, you may need to do one of the following:

1. Increase the value of the treat. Find something that he just would not be able to ignore.
2. Go back to the beginning exercise of working on the "let's go" in a quiet environment and gradually add distractions until he is able to keep his attention focused on the exercise.
3. Be sure to walk him before meals, when he has a little edge to his appetite, not immediately after, when he is full. Do not consider this exercise as a substitute to normal exercise.
4. It is a good practice to go to places where you can just sit and calmly hang out where there is mild distraction. Keep calm and keep dropping treats as he remains calm. If he begins to show too much interest in the surroundings, get his attention back on you by treating. This is teaching him that it is good to stay focused on you and that all the distractions are not as exciting as he initially thought.

Remember, you must take each step carefully and slowly and never ask your dog to do more than what he is ready for.