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Loose lead walking: Equipment, leaving the house safely and using environmental rewards

by Sadie Edmondson

One of the most common dog behaviour problems I am asked to help with is pulling on lead.

In the first part of this two-part series I will discuss the kindest and most useful equipment to use while training your dog and how to leave the house in a controlled and safe manner.

Not only does pulling on the lead create stress for both you and your dog and make you less likely to want to spend time outdoors with them but, if they are wearing any type of collar or lead around their neck, the pressure can lead to serious health problems such as hypothyroidism, sight problems and even collapsed trachea.

It is well worth putting in the time and effort to train your dog, using force-free methods, to walk nicely on the lead.

Firstly, you must consider the equipment you are using to walk them. No special collars or harnesses should ever be used as a permanent solution, but you may need one as an aid while you train your dog with positive reinforcement (rewards).

Aversive equipment (anything that is designed to reduce pulling by tightening or being otherwise painful or unpleasant) like choke, prong, shock collars or harnesses that tighten may create physical problems such as those mentioned above and are well documented to create fallout such as increased anxiety and aggression. It is essential that we consider our dog's happiness and comfort with the equipment they are wearing so that we avoid creating more behaviour problems.

Over the last couple of years the use of head collars has become increasingly popular. These collars can cause the dog considerable stress and anxiety. They naturally find them aversive as they control some movement of the head, often preventing the dog from showing calming signals and normal body language. The dog has to find other ways to signal his need for space if he is unsure about an approaching dog or person. They can create reactive (aggressive) dogs. They should never be used with a retractable lead or long line. They should only ever be used with a fixed-length lead but may still damage a dog's neck if they suddenly jerk their head or pull. Because you have to work so hard to ensure that your dog is safe from harm while wearing a head collar and that he does not dislike it (using rewards to slowly desensitise and counter condition it) I very rarely recommend them (in fact, I have not yet heard of a

case where I deemed it necessary to use a head collar). Retractable (or “flexi”) leads are also inadvisable as the dog gets used to the constant pressure and it can teach them to pull.

The equipment that I have found gives you the control you need while beginning this training, as well as making sure that your dog is comfortable and happy is a well-fitted, front-attaching body harness. I have used and would recommend the 'Mekuti balance harness', 'Xtra dog fleece walking harness' and the 'Dog games perfect fit harness', all available online. Used with a double ended lead, these harnesses work almost like a head collar, but controlling the whole body so it does not cause the dog to feel stressed and restrained. When the dog pulls ahead, the pressure is on the front piece of the harness (that spreads the pressure across their shoulders, avoiding the delicate neck area) so it gently guides them back round to you. The front clip also avoids the problem of “oppositional reflex” - the dog's natural instinct to push *into* pressure, not pull away from it - that you get with collars, slip leads or harnesses with a clip only on the back. When introducing the harness to your dog make sure that you use lots of treats to keep them still while you fit and adjust it, do not physically restrain them if you can help it.

So, now your dog is kitted out in a comfortable, well-fitting harness and double ended (clip on both ends) or fixed-length lead, you are ready to start the training.

It is difficult to work on loose lead walking training when you need to leave the house with your dog on-lead for their daily exercise. They are excited about getting out and need to pick up their investigate messages from other dogs and all of the sights and smells of the big, wide world, so they are likely to pull. Successful training and behaviour modification relies heavily on setting the dog up to succeed, so ideally the dog would have had a chance to sniff around outside and burn off a little energy before you start the training. Driving somewhere they can run safely off lead or on a long line, before you start training, will help a lot.

If you need to leave the house with an excited dog on lead, the first obstacle is getting out of the house without getting pulled off your feet. I teach my dogs and client's dogs that I walk to wait until I give the “Ok” to leave the doorway or gate (even when the door is open) using clicker training (a mark and reward system). This has nothing to do with hierarchy or any “pack leader” stuff, it is just a safety precaution and helps them to learn self control. The cue to go out is not me stepping out of the door, it is always the verbal release: “ok!”, sometimes I may need them to go out ahead of me. I instantly click (marking the behaviour) after my release cue so that they re-orient to me straight away to claim their reward (high value treat such as cooked chicken, little bits of cheese or home made liver cake). This gives me chance to get their attention and ask them to sit or wait so I can lock the front door or bolt the gate. After some practice this becomes automatic - the release cue (“Ok!”) when leaving

the house becomes a cue to step out of the door/gateway, turn, sit and wait for me to lock up.

The more you practice this (not just when heading out for a walk, but set aside some time to practice every day) your dog will be less excitable when you leave the house and you can set off for your walk safely and calmly.

In the second part of this series I will explain how to use environmental rewards to train and maintain a loose lead walking behaviour that makes walking the dog a relaxed and pleasurable experience for both you and him.

In this second part of a two-part series on training your dog to walk nicely on a loose lead, I will explain how to use environmental rewards to train and maintain a loose lead walking behaviour that makes walking the dog a relaxed and pleasurable experience for both you and him.

In the first part I covered the kindest and most effective equipment to use. Your dog should have a comfortable, well fitted body harness that does not tighten and preferably has a clip at the dog's chest as well as at the back. It also helps to use a fixed-length or double ended lead (not a retractable/flexi lead) for this training. I also explained how to teach your dog to leave the house in a calm and controlled way and wait for you to lock up before you give the "let's go!" cue.

When you need to take your dog out for their daily exercise and do not have time for "formal" training, make it clear to him (by attaching his lead to the back clip on the harness) that it is ok to sniff and explore about a little (they need to do this, exploring the environment through smell is essential for their well being, so we need to find a way to manage it when we have to have them on lead).

My rules for this type of walking are that they can sniff around and go to the end of the lead, but not pull any further, and they cannot go across me and trip me up with the lead!The way you train this is by stopping when they cross in front of you or the lead gets too tight that you are about to be tugged along.Try and stop before he gets to the target he is pulling towards (eg - particularly good lamp post for sniffing) otherwise the pulling will be rewarded.

Call him back (using his name, a kissy noise or other interesting noise that gets his attention or by a pre-taught cue that means come back to my side. I say "close") and set off again when the lead becomes slack, rewarding after a few steps with a loose lead (remember, when on the back clip it doesn't need to be a close "heel", just not pulling or crossing in front).It is important not to reward the dog for coming back to you straight away after the lead goes tight - only after a few steps forward or you risk setting up a behaviour chain of "pull

ahead - come back - get treat" and you end up with a dog that resembles a yo-yo on the lead!

When you do have time to do some training, attach the lead to the front clip or use the double-ended lead on both contact points – front and back (after a few sessions, this signals to the dog that there is an opportunity here to earn lots of high-value reinforcement for paying attention to you and walking closely).

It will be difficult for you to match the reinforcement that they get from those first few steps outside and all of the interesting sights, sounds and smells so you need to use really high-value treats again. I mix a few of these training goodies in with one of their daily meal portions and practice at tea time usually, instead of just putting it down in a bowl.

Go through the same steps as when you were leaving the house before, but instead of giving the 'let's go' cue (for when the lead is on the back clip only), choose another one. For example "heel". Although, for some reason I have noticed that people tend to say this cue in an intimidating or loud voice - perhaps because it harks back to traditional "obedience" training - so instead I tend to use and teach "steady", said in a cheerful or neutral tone, there is no need for intimidation or raising your voice at all while training your dog.

Click and treat heavily for attention, eye contact and walking next to you. At the start you really need to be rapidly firing out those treats. Practice leaving the house and walking a few meters, then repeat (going back inside and starting again from leaving the doorway) until the food (daily meal portion) has run out.

The more you practice, the longer you can ask your dog to "heel" ("steady" or whatever cue you have chosen) down the street, you can gradually fade the treats from one every few seconds to one every minute or so and you can start to add in distractions – walking with other people and dogs, pushchairs, or anything else that tends to make your dog excited and pull on the lead – going back to a high rate of reinforcement and gradually less treats every time you add a new distraction.

There will come a point in this training when your dog may start to offer "heeling", even when you leave with the lead attached to the back of the harness, so reward and praise heavily for that.

Always break the heeling (especially if you are asking them to do it for a long time) with opportunities to sniff. A good relationship with your dog, that creates great training, needs a bit of give and take: "If you heel for a while and give me attention, I will release you and wait for you to sniff that patch of grass".

It helps to put the sniffing it on cue. Not all rewards are ones that might immediately come to mind - treats, toys, praise - but access to sniffing spots and the outdoors can also be used as "environmental rewards". If we are

clever, we can control these rewards and use them to our advantage. If you are coming up to a lamp post, corner of a wall or smelly patch of grass (you will learn where your dog's favourite sniffing spots are), make sure you have their attention (wave a treat under their nose if you have to) and then use a release cue - "go sniff!", motioning with your body that they are allowed to go and investigate that interesting place. Allow them a moment to sniff and explore before cheerily saying "let's go!" and rewarding them for coming along with you.

Because you are providing the release to go and sniff you are adding an extra reward, the opportunity to sniff always comes through you. So, instead of just tugging you along to all the good sniffing spots, your dog should start to offer you previously reinforced behaviour (heeling/loose lead walking!) in an effort to get you to give the "go sniff" cue.

No matter how good your dog gets at waking on the lead, we must always remember to release them to sniff and be a dog often, otherwise they will forget that we allow them to sniff and may just take the opportunity to do so themselves at inappropriate times (when you are crossing a road, pulling across you to get to a good spot or tugging you along to a smell they have caught ahead).

Using science-based, kind and effective training you will find that your relationship with your dog strengthens along with improving their behaviour.

Happy training!

This is a great instructional video on how to train your dog to walk on a loose lead:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uvSx...>

And these are the harnesses I recommend that my clients use while they do so:
<http://www.xtradog.com/shop/shop-by...>

Loose Lead Walking by Jo Maisey

Why do dogs pull on the lead?

Dogs enjoy running about and exploring the outside world, usually at a faster pace than we walk. Dogs pull on the lead because we are slow and boring and pulling seems to get them where they want to go, which is usually somewhere more exciting!

Some breeds, such as sighthounds and arctic breeds are more prone to pulling than other breeds, but all can be trained to walk nicely on a lead.

When you allow your dog to pull, she learns that pulling gets her where she wants to go, so pulling is rewarded! It often becomes an ingrained habit.

Physically holding a dog back seems to invoke an oppositional, reflexive, pull response. Therefore the harder you pull on the lead, the more your dog will pull against you and she may well get frustrated.

Why should I train my dog to walk on a loose lead?

A dog who has been trained to walk on a lead without pulling is a delight to walk. People are much happier to walk a dog who has been well trained and as a result, the dog often gets more walks and goes to more places with their owners.

Training a dog to walk on a loose lead can help teach your dog to give you attention and control her impulses in the presence of other dogs or other animals that she may like to chase.

A dog that has been trained to respond well to the lead can easily be removed from any potentially stressful situations.

A dog that pulls on the lead can be a cause of frustration and embarrassment for the person on the other end of the lead. Sometimes this can lead to a situation where an owner is unable to walk their dog at all, which means that the dog does not get enough exercise or stimulation. This can give rise to an ever increasing cycle of frustration for both the owner and the dog, plus the dog is likely to develop some sort of behaviour problems connected with lack of exercise and stimulation.

Pulling on the lead when it's attached to a collar is physically uncomfortable for a dog and can impair breathing, circulation and cooling.

How do I achieve loose lead walking?

The lead is an important management and training tool and keeps your dog safe. It should always be loose unless you need to prevent her getting into trouble. Extending leads are generally not a good tool to use as they are too bulky and not very easy to use if you need to get your dog back to you quickly, plus by their very nature, there is always pressure on the lead.

Having a play session with your dog *before* going for a walk may help to release any excess energy and frustration, therefore making walking calmly with you that bit easier.

Unless you are going to compete in obedience you can teach your dog to walk on either side of you.

You'll need to think of on lead walks as training games rather than exercise while training is on-going. Keep the sessions short (around five minutes at a time) so she can concentrate and not get bored. Until she is good at walking without pulling, it may be an idea to drive her to somewhere she can go off lead for her exercise.

We are looking for it to become more fun and rewarding to walk on a loose lead than it is to pull on the lead.

You can lay good foundations for on lead walking by starting without a lead. Start off in the garden where there are little in the way of distractions. Every time your dog chooses to place herself by your left leg (or right leg if that's the side you choose to walk her), click and treat. Take a pace away, then when she places herself next to you again, click and treat. Repeat several times. Once she is choosing to place herself there regularly, you can add a spoken cue when she does so. The word(s) you choose are not important, but should always be the same to avoid confusion. You could use 'heel', 'close' or 'let's go' for instance.

Once you have built a really good foundation that being by your side is a good place to be, you can add the lead and start to walk. Start with your dog in place by your heel, and then take one pace forward. Your dog should follow you, so click and treat. Then take two paces forward. Click and treat if she comes with you and does not pull on the lead. Then take three paces forward... and so on until you have built duration up around 50 paces. At this point if your dog is doing well, you can start to build the duration in larger increments before clicking and treating and jump to increasing by around five paces each time.

If at any time your dog starts to lose concentration or begins to pull, then you will need to start from the beginning again at one pace.

You should aim to keep preparations for going for a walk calm and low key. If your dog is bouncing around before you even leave the house, then this behaviour is likely to continue when you go out of the door. If she is bouncing around when you pick up her lead, simply put the lead down again until she is calm. Repeat if necessary until she remains calm while you pick up the lead and attach it. She will soon learn that she needs to be calm if she wants to go out for a walk. You don't need to click and treat this as her reward will be that she gets to go for a walk.

You can also pick her lead up several times a day, but then go and do something else. This will teach her that just because you have picked up the lead; it does not always result in going for a walk. This should result in her not becoming over excited every time you pick her lead up.

You need to have a large supply of treats ready for when you leave the house, either in a pocket or a treat bag where they are easily accessible. Before moving off, you need to have your dog in the correct position by your left (or right) leg. Reward her for being there by a click and treat. If she doesn't put herself in the right position even when you wait for her to do so, you can drop a treat by your left (or right) heel.

The lead and clicker should be in the hand on the opposite side to your dog. You can then use the hand nearest your dog to deliver the treat. You want to deliver the treat so that your dog stays in the correct position to doubly reinforce it, so your hand should be near your trouser seam and at your dog's

head height. Using the other hand to deliver the treat may result in your dog coming across in front of you in anticipation of receiving the treat.

You need to start off in a place with few distractions and build up gradually into busier and more exciting places.

You can try several changes of direction and a change of pace to keep your dog interested and focused on you.

Try varying your treats so that sometimes they are really tasty and other times they are less so, such as kibble. This will keep her interest as this time it may be something really good!

Training is supposed to be fun for all involved and should always end on a positive note.

Tools that can Help

While you are training your dog to walk on a loose lead, it may be of use to use some sort of tool so that she can still get exercise without being rewarded for pulling. I find using a flat collar, harness and double ended training lead (sometimes called a police lead) a good combination that manages pulling without being painful for either your dog or you!

There are various types of collars, harnesses and leads, and also headcollars. There are pros and cons for all of them and what will suit one dog may not suit another.

Problems?

If your dog really isn't paying attention to you while out on a walk, she may be finding the distractions too great or may be overstimulated. If so, you could try:

- Increasing the value of the treats you are using. Something that she finds irresistible and doesn't get at any other time.
- Going back to a quieter environment to work on her loose lead walking and gradually build up to a more distracting environment.
- You may be building the duration by too large an increment. Try going back a few stages and building increments one pace at a time.
- Walking her before she is fed so that she is feeling hungry and more interested in the treats.

Step by Step. Teaching your dog to walk nicely on a leash by Leah Roberts

<http://dogwilling.weebly.com/blog.h...>

Helix Fairweather's Polite Walking

1. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CSm...>
2. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8qd...>
3. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-L1...>

Do harnesses encourage pulling?

<https://pawsitivelytraining.wordpress.com/...>

Series of videos on loose lead walking by Jose Gomes

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9cW...>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mHw...>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7kV...>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WPJ...>

Who's walking who? Part 1

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_at...

Who's walking who? Part 2

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YgO...>

Is it harmful to attach a leash to your dog's neck? by Emily Larlham (Kikopup)

<http://dogmantics.com/2013/07/17/is...>