

Let's Go For A Walk-Together!

No pulling please!

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Positive solutions for working with difficult dogs

We all dream of taking walks with our dog friends – each of us enjoying the quiet time together. What's better than the chance to just walk and “chat” amiably about the day? Perhaps this is why the most common question from my behavioral consultations and in my training classes is “Why does my dog always pull on the leash?”

The answer is easy – you have trained your dog to pull. Oh, not on purpose, but nonetheless you have taught your dog to drag you down the road. You have clipped the leash onto the collar, held on tight and followed your dog pretty much wherever he wanted to go. Because your dog needs lots of exercise (and he's probably not getting enough) and he wants to smell whatever is just down the road apiece, you get dragged along. Plus, at least some of the time, when you really have to get somewhere, you tighten up on the leash and drag him along with you. Also, when your dog wants to eagerly or angrily greet other people and dogs, once again you wrap that leash tight around your hand right up close to your dog's collar so he cannot get “in trouble”. That tight leash turns your walk into a tense argument instead of an amiable conversation.

But guess what? It does not have to be this way! In fact, it is not hard for both of you to have what you want. *Dogs do what works*. We have to teach them how walking on a loose leash will work best for them. So far your dog has learned that to get to the good smells, he will have to put up with gagging, coughing, choking, tongue lolling and eyes bugging out of his head while he drags the slow human to the good smell, and because you are tired and often in a rush and just want the walk over and done with, you give in and let the dog pull.

I work with many types of reactive dogs almost daily (they seem to be my specialty). For me, one of the easiest ways to assess the relationship between an owner and her dog is to watch how the owner handles and walks with the dog once out of the car, around the yard, or walking down the road. If the dog is dragging the owner or the owner has to drag the dog, then there is no effective communication between them. Their relationship is “out of whack”. Do you want to do a quick check on your own relationship with your dog? Then take a look at how you are holding your dog's leash. Is it wrapped multiple times around your hand? Are you holding the dog tight to your side? If so, you are sending the wrong message to your dog about whose walk this is.

Lots of dog collar and harness equipment manufacturers are counting on you not understanding how your dog instinctively reacts to pressure on its neck. Dogs have a physical reaction to having their collar pulled – they pull back. This is called an “opposition reflex”, and as the name implies it is an involuntary response. By understanding why your dog pulls, you can begin the simple process of teaching your dog that keeping the leash loose is the acceptable way to go for a walk.

To make walking fun for both you and your dog, you need to remember two important principles:

1. Following your dog does not work. In fact, NOT walking where your dog goes is part of how to fix the problem.
2. How you hold your leash is critical to teaching your dog that tension on the leash is what stops the walk. You will need to take the time to learn and practice good leash handling skills.

Dogs that are good on the leash have learned impulse control (self control). If you are lucky, your dog was born with it, but in most cases you are going to have to help your dog learn what works for both you and him when walking on a leash.

You do not have to teach your dog not to pull by jerking his neck with a choke collar or prong collar or slow him down with a harness - you just have to consistently apply rule number one: *Do not follow your dog if he is pulling you.* Everything you do is teaching your dog. If you follow when your dog pulls, you are teaching him to pull you around. As you retrain your dog to walk nicely, you cannot allow the dog too much freedom. If you are strict with yourself and follow the rules, loose leash walking usually only takes a few weeks of practice - *for the two of you.*

The truth is, while your dog learns the new rules, walking on a loose lead can be tiring and boring for both of you. To make the new rules more fun to learn, you can incorporate a game into your leash walking. It is called the “Find It” game. When you get ready to go for a walk, be prepared with some tasty treats in an easy to access pouch. As you follow these steps, you will learn where and how to include the game of “Find It” in your loose leash walk training.

Training Exercise Plan:

Goal: To handle the leash so it remains loose when the dog is in the right position. Good leash handling communicates how to walk as good friends – close enough and amiably enough to have a good conversation and not like a musher trying to slow down the sled dog team!

Do not have a destination in mind when training loose leash walking. Your goal is to teach your dog how to make you move forward by not pulling on the leash!!!! You are learning how to handle your leash tension so you can communicate to your dog what works. You cannot do this while also trying to get to a specific physical destination.

Leash Handling. All these directions are for the dog to be near your left knee. Your dog can be on either your left or right side – that is up to you. Choose a side and stick to it. If you would rather have your dog next to your right knee, then just switch the hand holding the leash. Avoid short leashes for medium to large dogs. A six to eight foot leash is best.

- Clip the leash to your dog’s collar.
- Place the loop end of the leash over your right thumb and let the leash hang toward the floor.
- You want to make the leash length flexible so you are going to “shorten” it. Lightly surround the leash with your left hand at your looped right thumb and slide your left hand down the leash about two feet.
- Now tighten your grasp on the leash at the two foot mark and fold it back into your right hand.
- Transfer the folded part of the leash into your right hand so all four fingers grip the folded leash into the middle of your right hand. Your six foot leash is now four feet long.
- The hand with the leash should be held close to the midsection of your body (around your belly button). Stand straight, relaxed, with the bent arm close to your body. The arm closest to your dog is hanging down at your side comfortably – NOT holding the leash.
- Start walking. The goal is for your dog to walk within a foot or so of your leg (left or right side-you choose) without pulling. There should be no tension on your dog’s neck from the leash. There should be a nice curve in your leash where it clips into the collar. The curve (also called a “J”) should be hanging straight down toward the ground - not pulled parallel to it.

Walking. When your dog leaves your side and goes to the end of the leash you have two choices to help your dog understand that it is the TENSION on the leash that he must fix if he wants to walk. Your choice depends on how strong the environmental distraction is for your dog.

Choice One. For strong distractions or the constant puller who never seems to walk nicely, you will start with this technique.

- As your dog starts to walk forward, release the two extra feet of the leash looped in your right hand. You are still holding onto the end of the leash that is looped over your right thumb.

- While your dog is walking forward, make an about turn to change your direction. The dog will continue to the end of the leash and will soon realize you are going someplace else! You do not say anything. DO NOT look back! You want the dog to see your back when he turns around.
- When your dog catches up to you, then collect the extra two feet of leash and loop it back into your right hand. Maintaining a loose but re-shortened leash, keep walking.
- *Praise verbally and smile and treat **ONLY** when the dog is in position and walking without leash tension.* You never have a hand on the leash close to the dog's collar. The hand closest to the dog is swinging naturally at your side – NOT holding any part of the leash.

Choice Two. If there are **NO environmental distractions**, your goal will be to keep moving forward, but you will use a different technique to show your dog that pulling will not work.

- When the dog moves forward fast enough to put tension on the leash, you should release the extra leash in your hand, while holding onto the loop end of the leash.
- Stop walking forward. Stand still. When the dog gets to the end of the leash, use the hand that is not holding the leash to grasp the leash about halfway down and guide the dog back into position next to your knee. Once he is in position, wait for 15 seconds to be sure he is not moving forward and then try again. If you see that your dog is alert to a distraction do not continue to walk in that direction, instead, cue your dog by saying “this way” and move away from the distraction.
- While walking on leash, if he proceeds in another direction, allow him the full length of the leash while you keep moving where YOU want to go. Once the dog finds you, then smile and verbally say “GOOD” – do not reward with food until the dog has walked with you for 5 or 6 steps in the direction you are going while keeping the leash loose.
- You can allow the dog to walk out in front if he has been walking nicely with you but NO pulling.

Note: I usually carry a flexi-lead and just clip the lead to his collar to make it clear to my dog that he has permission to move around freely for a few minutes. Then when we start walking again, I change leashes. This becomes a huge cue (signal) that when the walking leash is attached, the dog must walk with me – no pulling. And then, when I attach the flexi-lead, my dog may have some well earned freedom.

The “Find It” Game. A great game that can be included in your leash walking is called “Find It.” You will need to teach this game off leash in the house before adding it to your leash walking bag of tricks.

“Find It” is a fun game that lets your dog use his nose to hunt for treats. Once he learns the cue of “Find It”, then you can use it to refocus him away from environmental distractions while out on walks. This is how to play.

- Toss a treat – underhand, so it sails right by your dog's nose. As you toss it, say “Find It.” Make the toss short and easy in the beginning.
- When he finds the food, say “**YES!**” Saying “yes” will help him turn back to you hoping you will toss more. You might back up a little to lure your dog back to you – teaching him that to make the game continue he has to return to you.
- When the dog gets to you, immediately toss another treat in a different direction, saying “Find It” and then marking the successful find with “Yes!”

As your dog understands the game, you can make the tosses further and harder. If your dog cannot find the treat, help him by moving toward the area where it is on floor, but do not actually point it out – instead, help him discover it on his own because you have moved his attention with your body to right area. This game is great exercise, both physically and mentally, and it really builds his interest in interacting with you.

Once your dog instantly brightens and looks to you when you say “find it,” you can add the game to your training of loose leash walking. “Find It” will give you a fun way to redirect him away from environmental distractions. If you are walking on leash and your dog is distracted by another dog, people, animals, etc., then say “find it.” Wait until your dog looks to you and toss the treat in the direction that is

AWAY from the distraction. You must let the dog see you toss the treat – so toss it underhand, letting it sail just past his nose. You must allow your dog to find the treat so you will have to pause for a second, but as soon as he finds the treat, keep moving. If you goof and toss it so far that he will have to pull on the leash to get to the treat, then move with him while he hunts for it so he does not have to pull. Keep moving on your walk. If you need to do multiple treat tosses to outweigh the environmental distraction, go right ahead. Your job is to teach your dog that what the two of you are doing together is always better than the distractions in the rest of the world.

The “Get Behind” Exercise. One last exercise involves putting the leash behind your back. Fold it as you have learned above - allowing the dog about three feet of leash. Start walking through some highway cones or four chairs set up in a random clover leaf pattern with a fifth in the middle, close enough so only one of you can go through at a time. This helps your dog understand that he can walk behind you, which is a really useful skill when walking in a crowded area. Once your dog figures out that it is easier to get through the cones or chairs by following behind you, add your cue of “get behind.” Not only is this useful in crowded places, but if there is a distraction or a dog runs towards you, cue “get behind” and your dog will understand that he is not to take charge of this distraction situation – you will.

Walking together should be a pleasure for both you and your dog. Pulling is not fun for either of you and it is not necessary. By teaching your dog where he should be if he wants to go for a walk, and by taking the leadership position of being in front by asking your dog to “get behind” when there is a distraction, you are on the path to many happy hours of strolling amiably with your dog. Remember, you can allow your dog the intermittent privilege to walk out in front by switching to the flexi-lead as a reward for walking nicely.

Good luck! I hope you and your dog have many happy walks – strolling together as good friends do.