



Loose Leash Walking

Pulling on the leash can be one of the most frustrating problem behaviors a dog owner faces. Loose Leash Walking (LLW) requires consistency and practice from the human, which can be difficult to achieve in a busy life. It also requires a great deal of self-control from your dog, which you may have noticed isn't overly abundant.

First, what does a good Loose Leash Walk look like? Loose leash walking means exactly that – a walk where the leash is loose and without tension. Think of it like you are a tour guide taking your dog on a tour of your neighborhood. This is his chance to explore the environment beyond the four walls of your home. Your dog can stop, sniff, and enjoy the sights, but when the tour guide says it is time to get on the bus, there shouldn't be an argument.

To develop a great Loose Leash Walk, consider the question: "Why do dogs pull so much?"

Loose Leash Walking can be difficult to master because we usually have a lot of things working against us from our distracting environment to our dog's mood, even our dog's biology.

We often joke that our dogs have ADD, but the truth of the matter is that our dogs are not lacking the ability to pay attention – they are lacking the desire. Depending on the breed, a dog's senses can be hundreds of times better than ours. Imagine being stuck in your house all day, but there is no electricity – no internet, no computer, not even a light to read a book. Now, for 10-15 minutes twice a day, I am going to turn the electricity back on and you will have access to all of that.

Are you going to let me tell you what you can and cannot do during that short, precious time?

That is how our dogs feel when we ask them to walk around the block on a loose leash. The entire world is open to them, but we want them to walk on a predictable path at a what they consider a slow pace. Humans don't want to go dumpster diving in their neighbor's trashcan or chase that squirrel up a tree. Sometimes we don't even bother to engage with our dogs on a walk to keep their attention. Really, our walks are boring!

There is also something in our dog's genetic makeup that can make walking with a loose leash difficult that is called an "Opposition Reflex". Having an opposition reflex means that when pressure is applied, the animal would rather lean into the pressure as opposed to away from it. That means that the harder the we pull back on the leash, the harder your dog wants to pull in the opposite direction.

To begin teaching a good Loose Leash walk, remember that your goal at first is not to go on a *long* walk, but to make it very easy for your dog to make the right choice repeatedly. Your dog should realize that if they follow you when you move, something wonderful happens. To be successful in this, consider thoroughly exercising your dog *before* you go on a walk with a game of fetch or tug. Alternately try mentally stimulating games like hunting for hidden treats around the house or puzzle toys. While it may



seem counterintuitive, sometimes we need to help our dogs burn off their excess physical or mental energy before we can ask them to focus on self-control.

Think of your first steps to Loose Leash Walking like you are waltzing with your dog. When your dog makes eye contact with you, take one step in any direction you wish. If your dog chooses to walk toward you instead of away from you, you should Mark, Reward, and wait for eye contact once more before taking another step in a different direction. If your dog chooses to move away from you, simply stand still and wait for your dog to check in with you. It's alright if your dog gets distracted! Be sure to reward them the moment they check back in – you may not be their first choice yet, but if you reward your dog every time he chooses you, you soon will be!

Remember that a walk doesn't have to be linear. Smoothly change directions randomly and often. By changing direction again and again, you are keeping your movement unpredictable and interesting for your dog while also encouraging them to offer focus. Try walking a few steps in one direction before cueing "This way!" and changing directions. Walk ten steps in that direction before cueing "This way!" again and walking in a new direction.

A fun, alternate way to practice your LLW that will help with goal-oriented pulling is to set up an exercise to help your dog build his self-control. This exercise involves a 'Starting Line' and a 'Finish Line'. At the Finish Line, you will set up a prize for your dog like a pile of treats or a frisbee with some peanut butter smeared on it – make sure your dog sees what is there! You will then take your dog, on leash, to the Starting Line, wait for eye contact, and begin to move forward using the "Let's go!" cue. If your dog begins to pull toward the reward, the you should turn away and walk back to the Starting Line to try again. Reward every couple of steps for your dog staying with you. Once you reach the prize at the Finish Line, release your dog to take the well-deserved prize at the end! After a couple of times, most dogs will realize that by pulling toward the reward they are actually delaying their access to it. This game can be performed in a driveway, on a sidewalk, or down a hallway inside if fewer distractions are needed.

If you feel like your dog is in constant need of an activity to keep him busy, you can try what is called the "Drop Treat" method of walking. This exercise has a Hansel and Gretel feel to it, as you will be leaving a trail of treats for your dog to follow while they learn to keep in step with you. This game involves a bit of timing practice but can be incredibly effective once you have your rhythm down. To do this exercise, you will start with several treats in the hand on the side you would like your dog to walk on. You will drop a treat at your feet and begin to walk forward slowly. Your dog will likely immediately snatch the treat and begin to walk. As he catches up with you, drop another treat by your feet. Your dog will quickly figure out the game and begin looking up at you in anticipation of you dropping the next treat. Slowly start adding more steps between dropping treats and offer alternate rewards like petting and praise.

Some dogs need even more motivation and you may need to start with a lure. Try coating a wooden spoon with Kong spread or dog-safe peanut butter (freeze it for a longer session). Hold it down near the



seam of your pant leg, letting your dog lick it as you walk. As your dog realizes you have something really exciting, try to lift the lure up and away every few steps and bring it back down to reward eye contact. This can also be helpful when you are purposefully going out to practice with a known distraction. You can use it to successfully lure your dog past it a few times and reward for success.

When your dog learns to move with you and you are able to keep their attention for multiple steps, try a more distracting environment. Remember when adding distractions, take it slow to ensure that you build a strong foundation. For instance, if you are practicing in your backyard, try practicing when you know the neighborhood kids are outside playing, even if your dog can't see them. The sound of children playing can be quite distracting. Once you are successful, you can move up to letting your dog see them from a distance until you can eventually walk right past them. There is nothing wrong with having your dog's walks occur in your backyard until you are moving together with ease. Again, it is better and often paramount to take smaller steps that will ensure success. Your dog must find value in staying close to you.

Practice makes perfect. The more that you allow your dog to practice pulling, the more difficult it will be to teach him to walk on a loose leash. Your job is to set him up to succeed and ensure that he understands the rules by consistently practicing behaviors you want them to perform.