

Let's Walk Dogs

By Dorothy Turley, CPDT-KA, CNWI

Do you have a new dog in your home that thinks he is a sled dog and you are his freight? Or do you spend your entire dog walk jerking, hissing or commanding "Heel!"? Well, please stop. If your dog is still pulling, it is not working. Teaching your dog to walk on a loose leash is a very important part of training. But it can be a difficult skill for the dog and human. Most people give up in frustration and then begin the downward spiral of less walks that lead to and an under trained, under socialized dog.

I was spoiled for many years while I lived in a rural area with dogs that were reliable off leash. I had become very sloppy about teaching my own dogs some loose leash walking skills and rarely leashed all three or four dogs for walks. Even though I enjoyed nice long off leash walks with my dogs, I wanted to take them places where leashes required. Unfortunately, my dogs and I had no skills for even the most basic on leash walks. Bringing myself and multiple dogs up to speed on this skill was very time consuming. It made me think that perhaps my own clients faced the same problem even if they only had one dog.

The true secret to teaching your dog to walk on a loose leash is very simple. Stop going with him when he pulls. There are many different ways to do this and no one simple answer for all dogs. But the answer is the same for all humans. You must be consistent. Every time you put a leash on your dog you must be prepared to train him to walk nicely on that leash. Every time you let him pull to what he wants, you are actually training the opposite of what you want—a loose leash. You may as well feed him treats while he pulls. Let me say it another way; a dog moving forward on a tight leash is getting rewarded for pulling. You never meant that to be the case but that is exactly what is happening.

When I committed to walking all dogs on leash, I realized that I had a problem. Honestly, I am just not that consistent (especially with multiple dogs). Yes, even a dog trainer wants a break and just wants to zone out a bit while on a walk with her dogs. If I feel that way, my clients must also. The problem is that training is always happening whether you are actively participating or not.

Dogs pull us because it works. My friend, Kathy Sdao, speculates about what our dogs would say if they could be interviewed about their behavior. I think that if we asked most dogs about walks the response would be, "I love to go on walks but I have to pull my owner everywhere." Your dog genuinely thinks that pulling is what makes the walk progress. How could he think otherwise? And, is he wrong?

So, what do you do to get from a sled dog to a walking partner? I think you must take some realistic, achievable steps that will keep you and your dog walking. To start, I give you permission to let your dog walk in front of you at times. He is not being dominant or aggressive. You are not a bad dog owner. You just walk slow compared to a dog. He thinks you move at the speed of a turtle and patience is not his greatest virtue. Don't be concerned about perfect "Heel" position (your dog's head lined up with your pant seam on the left side of your body) until your dog has a concept of how to walk with you on a slack leash.

I even give you permission to let your dog pull sometimes. Yes, you read that correctly. Oh, well, there are some conditions. First, this is only allowed in unpopulated areas. You may not let your dog lunge at the end of a 20 foot flexi leash in the farmers market on Saturday morning.

Second, your dog must be dressed appropriately. That means he is wearing a body harness and the leash is hooked to the back. If this outfit looks like the way a sled dog would dress, that is because it is very similar. If you are going to move forward while your dog is pulling at least dress him so he is not constantly slamming his trachea against a neck collar. This is also the only piece of equipment you should ever attach an extension or flexi leash to. Otherwise your dog is feeling constant pressure on his neck as a flexi leash keeps tension as it extends and retracts. Walking a dog on a flexi leash that is constantly tight on a collar teaches the dog that the leash should feel tight and that is how the walks should progress.

There are times when I want my dog to have freedom but cannot let him off leash. Uncrowded parks and some beaches are perfect times to let your dog roam a bit. Though I would rather it was on a loose leash, if your choice is between a loose leash and no walk at all then use a body harness. This is safer and easier on the dog's body. The harness is also what we call a discriminative stimulus. Wearing the harness tells the dog that more freedom is allowed when walking in this equipment.

They now make body harnesses that hook to the front of the dog. These are very helpful for eliminating a lot of pulling. I use this equipment set up when we are in more populated areas, getting in and out of buildings and other times where I want some extra control but am not going to require heeling from my dog. These harnesses are great for most people for every day use. You can also quickly switch from the front to back attachment if the walking situation changes.

You can always practice loose leash walking in any outfit that your dog is wearing. But by dressing him differently, you are giving your dog a message about what your expectations are for him. For those times when you do want to go to farmer's market but your dog does not have the skill level to handle it, investigate a head halter. These are great for getting you through difficult situations until you and your dog have more training and skills to handle the situation. Be very careful to avoid collars and equipment that give "instant" results but rely on pain to stop the pulling. The problem is that there is no way to ensure your dog will connect the pain with his pulling. All too often a dog begins to associate the pain with people, dogs or environmental circumstances. This can lead to fearful and aggressive responses.

Why am I telling you to break the traditional rules of walking your dog? Because you can't teach your dog (and yourself) to do better if you can't get out the door. These suggestions are not an excuse not to train. They are short term solutions so that you can still get out into the world. So set a goal for yourself. Walk your dog often and commit to three two minute training sessions in each half hour walk.

Despite this advice, you cannot give up on teaching your dog good manners and how to walk on a leash. Otherwise, you are forever restricted to unpopulated walking areas and your dog will be left behind more often than either of you would like. And how do you teach your dog to walk nicely on leash? Unfortunately, that is another article (or two or three). But for now, let's just get you and your dog out in the world safely.