

Loose Leash Walking

Dogs are not born knowing how to walk nicely on a leash, or how to walk on a loose leash. Only after training and consistent expectations can you expect your dog not to pull on leash, tangle the leash between their legs, or walk around or through your legs. Teaching your dog to walk on leash not only makes walks more pleasant but it also increases your dog's chances of getting out of the house more for the exercise that is so important to their daily needs.

Training Process

Begin working in a very low distraction area, inside your home, with lots of yummy treats. Begin by working with your dog off leash. Reward your dog with a treat any time it chooses to come near you. If the area you are working in has no other distractions (people, other animals, toys, etc.) then you will be the most interesting thing in the room. After a few treats the dog should realize that being next to you is the most rewarding place to be.

Once your dog is choosing to stay near you, start by taking 1-3 steps and then reward your dog for following you. Each time you reward your dog, use a marker such as "YES," "GOOD," or click a clicker and then give the treat (do not give the treat before or during your marker word/click, only give it AFTER your marker). Gradually work up to taking 3-5 steps, 5-7 steps, until you can walk continuously, without stopping, and reward your dog every few steps for staying next to you.

When you give your dog the reward, give it to him right next to your thigh on the chosen side that you want your dog to walk on. Always provide the reward at the dog's mouth level (for shorter dogs you may need to bend down part way to deliver the treat to the dog's mouth). If the dog walks out ahead of you STOP immediately and stand still until the dog turns his attention back to you. When the dog turns his attention back to you say "YES" and give a treat. If the dog does not immediately turn back towards you, make a noise such as a kissing noise or mouth click or say the dog's name. If your dog still does not turn around take one step back at a time until the dog does turn and look at you. As soon as the dog turns and looks at you, mark the behavior by saying "YES" and give a treat.

If the dog continually gets out in front of you, give treats at your side more frequently. For example, give one treat for looking at you while stationary then as you take a step forward give a second treat for the dog taking the first step with you. Give another treat before the dog can get out ahead of you. You may need to "rapid fire" treats like this for a few seconds until the dog catches on that walking next to you is more rewarding than walking out ahead of you. As the dog gets more used to walking next to you, you can reduce the rapidness of treat delivery. Remember that your timing is everything and if your dog is not being successful, try giving treats more frequently. If your dog is not taking the treats that you have provided, in the next session try a higher value (read: more flavorful junk food) in the next session such as hot dogs, bits of cheese, bits of chicken or even steak.

When your dog is reliably walking next to you in this low distraction area you are ready to start increasing distractions gradually. When you increase distractions you have to increase the frequency of the reward delivery. It is also really important to have very special yummy treats for working on loose leash walking when there are distractions. Your dog would enjoy exploring all types of new distractions but if you have chosen the right type of treat he will choose to ignore those things to get the treats that you have.

The next step is to put your dog's walking equipment on him (leash, collar, harness, etc.) and then drop the leash, allowing it to drag, and start over from the beginning.

After that, with your dog wearing his equipment, pick up the leash and repeat from the beginning. Once your dog is walking on a loose leash inside your home, start over from the beginning in the back yard. After your dog is successfully walking on a loose leash in the back yard, repeat in the front yard. Each time you start over, remember to stand still and wait for the dog to choose to stay near you. When the dog chooses to stay near you then you can begin moving – but only a few steps at a time at first.

When teaching the same behavior in a new environment you are adding a level of distraction which makes it harder for your dog. Also, when teaching the same behavior in a new environment, your dog should catch on to the "game" a little bit faster than the last time. If your dog is not catching on, back up to a previous step and make sure you aren't missing anything or try decreasing the amount of distractions that are competing with you for your dog's attention.