

Leash walking: Loose leash walking is one of the most challenging behaviors to teach. It's not a particularly "natural" behavior -- there's nothing equivalent in the dog world -- and walking relative to something else is a non-discrete behavior, which means there's no obvious "right" or "wrong" -- the trainer decides what's acceptable. So it's tough on the dog AND tough on the trainer. That said, it is possible to teach your dog to walk on a loose leash. However, to be completely fair -- and to give yourself (and the dog) the highest probability of success -- you need to look at the whole picture. Very often the trainer considers only his own agenda -- walk nicely on this leash -- and doesn't consider the dog's wants and needs in the situation.

Choosing the Right Approach for the Age of Your Dog How old is the dog you're training? Different age dogs need different approaches because their own needs are different.

- Puppies (0-6 mos.) Puppies are brand new to the world. Literally. Everything is new to them. They have little or no history -- good or bad -- related to what you want. They also have a very short attention span.

With puppies, I've found the best method is to have a few steps of highly reinforced loose leash and attention followed by a lot of playing/sniffing/exploring. Then a few more exciting, highly reinforced steps followed by more playing/sniffing/exploring.

Think of it as "on" and "off" -- and have cues for each. I use "with me" and "go play."

This isn't a gift you're giving your dog. It's necessary. Your dog must learn about the world around him. It's part of his socialization. If he doesn't experience lots of things at this critical time, he's likely to be fearful and insecure later.

- Adolescence (6 mos. - 3 years) I'm not exaggerating about that time period. Your dog may look like an adult, and you may feel like he's been around forever and "should act better" but if he's under three, you've still got an adolescent on your hands.

Adolescence is a time of growing and boundless energy. It's the time when the dog grows up mentally -- when he begins testing all of the choices available to him and making decisions about which path he's going to follow. (Remember when you were an adolescent?) This isn't rebellion. It's not stubbornness or defiance or dominance. It's a necessary part of growing up. "Because I said so" doesn't cut it anymore. He has to find out what works and what doesn't.

This is a challenging age. Your foster dog is bigger and stronger, and he's full of energy. Now, more than any other age, you need consistency. Remember, every time you give in and let him pull, you're not only reinforcing pulling, but you're putting it on a variable schedule of reinforcement and STRENGTHENING it.

When you don't have time to work on walking on a loose leash, MANAGE the situation. Get a Gentle Leader (head collar) or no pull harness and use it. If he pulls in the head collar/harness, circle him until he's paying attention. When you have time to work on walking on a loose leash, work on it. The "on and off" game works well for this age too -- especially if they have a place where they can really run and get the ya-yas out. Once all the ya-yas are out of them, they are capable of working for longer, more concerted periods of time.

- Adult dog (3+ years) At some point after three years, dogs begin to settle into adulthood. THIS is when you can take long walks and reasonably expect your dog to walk quietly -- this is, IF you have built a reinforcement history. On and off is still a nice concept, and adults still have exercise needs and still need to get the ya-yas out, but overall, this stage is the goal.

Teaching Loose Leash Walking:

Step 1: Define It : The first step is to define what you want. Seriously. Maybe you want the dog to walk attentively sometimes and inattentively (sniffing, etc.) at other times. Maybe when the leash is on, you want attention at all times. What level of tension in the leash is okay? (If you're using a Flexi, you're going to have tension.) Maybe you want the dog to know that when on a Flexi he can walk one way, and when he's on a leather leash, he walks another way. It's up to you. But you can't progress until you define what you want. If you do, you'll be inconsistent, which isn't fair to your dog.

Step 2A: Attention: The second step is to work on attention. If your dog is in front of you, or sniffing, or looking around, you ain't got his attention. Can you get it? Always? If not, you need to work on that. It's the single most crucial behavior you can possibly train because if you can't get your dog's attention, you aren't going to get *any* other behavior.

Attention is like every other behavior. It has to be taught in increasingly distracting situations. Start in the house. Just click and treat every time the dog looks at you. Don't call the dog's name or pat your leg. Just wait and click the offered behavior. Do this throughout the day whenever attention is offered. If you don't have food, just reinforce with smiles, pets, and kind words.

Move to different rooms. Gradually increase your criteria -- start with a glance and work up to a second or two at least. Then go outside. Just stand there and wait. You may have to wait a while, but eventually he will get it. Keep taking him to different locations - starting in boring locations, of course.

Step 2B: Practice Off-leash: What practice loose leash walking without the leash? The leash is a tether for safety in case of emergency. It's not a guide to hold the dog in

position. The goal is to teach the dog is to walk in the proper place, so what difference does it make if you're using a leash? The reason I named this step "2B" is because it can be taught while you're working on attention even before you take your dog on the leash outside.

Practicing off-leash walking: You can start by "baiting" your dog with a treat to help him get into proper heel position. You can also pat your leg as you call him to get him into position. Just wander around and randomly call him to "heel". Make being at your left side the most reinforcing place in the world. Once you have success you can start replacing some of the treats with a "good boy" and other verbal praise.

Practice in the house. Practice in a fenced yard. Practice in a fenced tennis court. Practice anywhere it's both safe to let your dog off leash AND quiet and small enough that he's not going to forget about you completely. (Remember, you're supposed to be practicing attention too. Perhaps get him focused on you and THEN practice off-leash walking....)

Step Three: Walking in the Correct Position: Next, teach the dog that walking in the correct position -- and you defined that in the first step -- is reinforcing. Don't skimp on this step. Shovel treats when they're doing it right. Make it the best place to be. How long do you have to do this? Until it's a habit. If the dog is wandering off, tripping you, jumping around, etc., isn't a habit. You can even use your dog's dinner, piece by piece, morsel by morsel, on walks until the habit is ingrained.

Step Four: Be A Tree: Fourth, teach your dog that it's not worth the trouble to go to the end of the leash. This is the "Be a Tree" method we talk about. Use the "Be a Tree" method when the dog is pulling out of natural exuberance, NOT when he's trying to pull toward something specific. The basic idea is simple: Never, ever take another step if the dog is in front of you. Stop moving. Freeze.

The success of "Be a Tree" is dependent upon several factors:

- Maintain a high rate of reinforcement when the dog is in correct position. This is one of the biggest mistakes I see. People forget to maintain a high rate of reinforcement in correct position, and the dogs quickly figure out that they can go to the end of the leash and back to get a treat.
- Don't increase your criteria until the dog is actively offering the current criteria. If the dog wanders to the end of the leash and spends five or ten seconds staring at something before turning to look at you, you are *not* ready to increase the criteria.
- Always, always, always deliver the reinforcement in heel position. Click for whatever criteria and, if necessary, lure the dog back into the correct position before delivering the treat. Teach your dog that treats ONLY come in heel position -- and that they are available freely there.

Step Five: Environmental Rewards: Finally, the fifth step is to teach your dog that you are the giver of all environmental rewards. The dogs are pulling and excited because there's neat stuff out there. That's not a bad thing. Just take the time to teach them that 100% of that stuff comes from you.

Use "penalty yards" (TM pending, Lana Horton): Walk nicely to the bush, and you can sniff. Whoops! You lunged, let's walk back to the starting point and try again.

Think of the environmental rewards as just that -- rewards. You say you lose your dog's attention even when working with the very best treats? Then use what he **does** want -- a chance to sniff and mark and play. "On and Off" can easily be used as a reinforcement system -- pay attention and walk nicely for a few steps and you can go do what you want for a few seconds.