



Foundations for Walking Politely on Leash

Walking a dog that comes along with us, calmly and on a loose lead is a pleasure. Getting there can be a challenge!

- For many dogs, pulling on the leash is a self reinforcing behaviour (remember – behaviour that is reinforced increases)
- Because of the self-reinforcing nature of pulling, teaching a dog to walk consistently on a loose lead requires persistence and consistency in order to prevent the natural reinforcement that the dog receives from pulling.

Heeling (on or off leash) means that the dog walks with his withers (shoulders) close to (touching or almost touching) the handler's left leg and keeping pace with the handler through changes in gait and direction. The dog should be highly focused on the handler, making eye contact while doing formal heeling. Heeling is important for competitive obedience and other dog sports but is not a comfortable behaviour for the dog to sustain over long periods. It is especially difficult for small dogs that have a long way up to look to maintain eye contact and who are more likely to be stepped on when close because their feet are in closer proximity to the handlers feet.

Loose leash walking is a less formal walking pattern in which the dog walks in close proximity to the handler, within the range of a loose leash, but not necessarily in a precise position with respect to the handler. The dog should remain on one side of the handler and not cross behind or in front of the handler. He may move out to the side, forward or back, but always maintaining a loose leash. This requires that the dog stay connected with you so he can adjust his pace accordingly and turn with you but he is free to look at other things and explore the environment within the confines of the leash. Think of the loose leash walking zone as a semicircle off to your side that extends a bit behind and ahead of you. The size of the semi circle is determined by the length of the leash. This now becomes a moving reinforcement zone – whenever the dog is in the zone, this is a reinforceable behaviour.

Right or Left? Which side you choose to have your dog walk on is entirely up to you. Heeling is traditionally done on the left because it harks back to hunting with dogs. Most individuals are right handed, therefore carry guns / bows etc. in the right hand. With the dog on the left, there is less chance of him becoming entangled with the gun or bow or impeding the hunter's ability to draw. Formal obedience requires heeling on the left but many dog sports require the dog to work from both sides of the handler. Which side you choose is up to you and what feels right for you. If you want to do formal obedience, it is best to choose the left side. These notes will assume you are working on the left, but if you choose to use the right side, then just remember to reverse things.

Some dogs naturally walk close to the handler and rarely pull...others are industrial pullers who habitually walk as far out on the leash as possible, pulling with all their might. Both genetics and past experience contribute to a dog's likelihood of being a persistent puller.

- **Genetics:** Huskies, Malamutes and Samoyeds are intentionally bred to pull. Beagles and Scent hounds are breed to keep moving forward, following a scent and ignoring discomfort (including discomfort from a tight lead or collar). Terriers tend to be very persistent and very stoic, so will happily ignore discomfort caused by pulling. Many of these dogs will be strong pullers who are not deterred by discomfort from 'walking devices' that are intended to make pulling uncomfortable (such as choke or prong collars). So, aversive methods may not work and since pulling is inherently reinforcing, these dogs will require dedicated work on the part of the handler and consistent, huge reinforcement to learn a new way of walking!
- **Experience:** Dogs pull...because it works! Pulling is reinforcing because it gets them where they want to go. The more pulling is reinforced, the stronger and more resistant to extinction it becomes. Every time they pull and successfully move forward, the behaviour gets stronger. Being allowed to pull sometimes

makes the behaviour much more resistant to extinction because it is now on an intermittent schedule of reinforcement where the dog never knows if it is going to work or not, so tries harder.

In developing strong loose leash walking behaviour, your primary goal is to make walking in close proximity to you BETTER THAN ANYTHING ELSE your dog will encounter while walking. That is a very tall order. Your best tools are: really, really great reinforcers and a huge history of reinforcement for paying attention to you and walking close to you.

The following exercises help to build a strong foundation for ‘walking politely on leash’.

Because pulling is SELF-REINFORCING, while you are building this foundation, I recommend **NO WALKS ON LEASH** (gasp!). Yes, it is ok, not to walk your dog! Society has created an expectation that dogs must be walked – but this is not based on any scientific evidence. Yes, dogs need exercise – however, walking with a human is NOT a great form of exercise for most dogs. Walks can be enriching and an important way to build a bond with our dogs and give them welcome experiences but walking is only one way to exercise your dog. There are many other ways to give your dog exercise.

- Playing fetch with a ball or Frisbee
- Playing tug or chase games
- Working on a balance ball
- Puppy push-ups (working through position changes: sit - down - sit - stand – down etc.
- Playing with other friendly, size appropriate dogs
- Mental exercise is also important, especially for dogs that have ‘energy to burn’ – work on shaping a new behaviour

For very young puppies, keep in mind that growing joints do not welcome prolonged walking. Most people tend to walk puppies much further than is wise, again because society has convinced us that walking is good, and the more energy a dog has (and puppies have lots!) the more we should walk them.

If you continue to walk your dog and allow some pulling while you try to build a foundation of polite walking, you will further entrench pulling and only make your job harder. So since walks are not essential and since for most dogs they don’t really achieve what we think they achieve through walks, I recommend setting them aside and replacing them with other activities while you do the foundation training.

Foundation exercises

Building value for being in close proximity to you

1. Remember to use reinforcer placement (close to your body) to help build value for proximity to you.
2. Hand feeding your dog at least one meal a day (and bringing him close to your body to take the food) will help make you a valuable resource and increase his desire to be in close proximity.
3. Reinforce your dog for spontaneously coming close to you at any time. This should be part of your SMART 50 practice). If you do not have food handy, praise and then run with him to get a treat or throw a ball...whatever he really, really enjoys.
4. **Be in the Zone 1:** Set your dog up, off leash, in a safe / secure area. Have a generous supply of treats that your puppy can quickly eat (small soft treats work best). Show your puppy a treat and bring him in close to the side you want him to walk on. Give him the treat right by your leg. Take a step forward and set a treat on the ground by your instep. Take another step and place a treat again – repeat. Keep moving forward – move just slowly enough that your puppy does not lag too far behind. It is fine if your puppy stops and sits down to eat his treat but don’t stop moving altogether. Once your dog has the idea that treats are magically appearing by your foot he will move to keep up with you. At this point you can wait till he is in position by your left side to drop a treat. You can even introduce the click at this point – click as he moves into position by your side. As your dog starts to be more and more diligent about staying at your left side, you can increase the challenge by moving more quickly and in different directions, clicking and setting a treat by your foot whenever he is in position.
5. **Stand by me:** Stand with your dog on leash. If he moves to the end of the leash, remain perfectly still. The instant he releases tension on the leash, click and toss him a treat (make sure it is within loose leash range). If /when he goes back to end of the leash, repeat (stand still, wait till he release leash tension, click and toss a treat). This teaches him that **he controls tension on the leash** and that a loose leash is

rewarded. Gradually toss the treat closer and closer to your left foot so your dog has to come close to you to get it. Start by doing this exercise in a low distraction environment, then once your dog is happily playing the game with you, take it on the road to a variety of different areas - where you can stand and be undisturbed but where interesting things happen – such as on a beach, or near a dog park or near a childrens’ playground, near the doors of Wal-Mart or Canadian Tire.

6. **Off leash check-ins:** Work in a safe area. Remove the leash and let your dog do his own thing. Move around the area randomly. Any time your dog comes in close to you, reinforce with something wonderful. The first time he voluntarily checks in with you – have a treat and praise party. If your dog loves tug, have a tug session (at least 30 seconds) with lavish praise. Then release him to go off and do his own thing. Resume moving around the area waiting for him to check in. DO NOT cue him to check in. This must be his idea /his choice to be effective. At first you can reinforce if he comes near but does not actually get in the RZ at your side. Mark him for coming in, but use the reinforcer to lure him into position before you give it. Once he is good at coming back to the reinforcement zone, you can deliver the treat by tossing it away to set him up for another repetition if you like. **Up the ante:** once your dog decides that hanging out with you is better than exploring on his own you are ready to increase the challenge. Start moving about the area more briskly, making rapid changes of pace and direction. Mark and reward him for staying with you – or for finding you again if he gets left behind.