

Loose Leash Walking – The Circle Method

The best exercise for a dog is to be off leash, able to indulge his scent-based instincts and to use his body naturally and to its fullest capabilities. This allows the most appropriate, natural, physical exercise, calms a dog's mind, lowers his heart rate, and provides the stimulation needed to produce an emotionally balanced, contented, physically sound dog. Walking a dog permanently or predominantly on leash can lead to frustration, stress, physical problems, and a dog who is difficult to live with. However, the reality of our modern society is that a dog has to be leashed at least some of the time, and for everyone's comfort this is something dogs have to learn to cope with.

When training good leash manners, it is important to understand why dogs feel the need to pull. Dogs and humans are fundamentally different when it comes to exercise and enjoying the outdoors. Off leash, these differences don't matter, but when the two species are tied together, these differences create considerable conflict.

- 1) Dogs do not understand the concept of restraint. When something pulls against them, their instinctive reflex causes them to pull in the other direction. So the more you try to haul them back, the harder they will haul you forward. Many dogs really do think that the only way to make you move is to lean into the collar and drag you.
- 2) The natural pace of a dog is significantly faster than that of a human. To stay with us, a dog has to move at a very slow, unnatural gait, which is uncomfortable and frustrating.
- 3) Dogs want to engage with their environment rather than walk. They see the world much more through their noses than their eyes, and do not head out with a set plan in terms of direction, speed, or destination – those things are determined by whatever is distracting them at any particular time. Humans, on the other hand, are very much goal oriented – we are thinking about getting from A to B, in a direct line and at a constant pace, and can take in the world visually as we go.
- 4) Humans generally have a great deal of freedom; dogs generally live lives of restriction and containment. So getting out is intensely exciting and there is often a great deal of pent-up frustration and stress involved.

Successful leash walking, therefore, needs to be done in a way that:

- 1) Reduces the dog's level of frustration
- 2) Allows the dog to move at a more natural speed and in a more mechanically natural way
- 3) Allows the dog to indulge his scent-based instincts and his desire to engage with the environment
- 4) Shows the dog how to react appropriately to pressure on the leash

The Circle Method

This method works very quickly as long as you are consistent. It's a very simple method that also works really well for reactive dogs. Best of all, you can still walk all your dogs together, AND you can still go for a proper walk!

You will need:

- 1) A long leash 2 – 3 metres in length. This must be comfortable for you to hold with both hands and provide good grip – soft webbing is best. No retractable leads, chain, cord or rope as these are likely to cause injury.
- 2) A leather or webbing collar – no check chains or slip collars. A martingale style is okay if your dog tends to slip his collar. Thin collars will cut into the dog's neck, so wider is better. A front clip harness is okay if your dog can't wear a collar. A back clip harness will do if you really have nothing else.
- 3) A wide space or track along which to walk with your dog. To start with, use somewhere where you are not likely to be bothered by other dogs approaching and it is easy to avoid other people and obstacles.

The Method

- 1) Attach the leash to your dog's collar. Hold it at the end with both hands, one hand about a forearm's length in front of the other. This gives you the best control and makes the leash easier to handle.
- 2) If your dog is REALLY excited when you first set off, let him run in circles around you at the end of the leash, with you in the centre turning with him, as if you were lunging a horse. Walk in a small circle or you will get dizzy!
- 3) Once your dog has released some of his energy, start walking. As soon as your dog places more pressure on the leash than you find acceptable, start walking in a wide circle, taking him sideways into the circle with you. Try to stay in front of his shoulder - if you are behind his shoulder, you will be trying to pull him backwards rather than sideways and he will resist and pull harder. With the leash pulling him from the side, you have much more leverage and he will have no choice but to move into the circle with you. Make sure the dog is on the outside of the circle so he is going around you, not you going around him. This way he can keep moving, cover more ground than you, and travel at a much faster pace, allowing him to burn more energy and avoid frustration. Walk so that your circle still takes you a little bit forward on your path, rather than just staying in the same place.
- 4) When you complete the circle, continue forward. If the dog puts pressure on the leash again, make another wide circle, walking so that you are still moving forward on your original path. If you are getting dizzy, widen your circle – keep your head up and look where you are going. It doesn't matter which direction you circle in – but one direction is likely to seem more obvious than the other.
- 5) Initially you will be circling pretty constantly. Be consistent and circle EVERY time your dog pulls – the more consistent you are the faster this will work. Be consistent about how much pressure on the leash is too much – that's a personal preference but your dog needs to be able to learn what the limit is and he can only do that if it is the same every time. If the dog pulls but then quickly releases the pressure, you do not need to circle. If you are not sure whether to circle or not, circle anyway! It is better to circle unnecessarily than to not circle when you should have.
- 6) Your dog can walk anywhere he likes – beside, ahead, or behind you. Many dogs start moving across the path from side to side or circling automatically around you. This is a sign that your dog is learning that he can reduce pressure but still keep moving. Let your dog stop and sniff at things along the way as long as he is not towing you towards them. Adjust the length of the leash as needed by pulling or releasing it with your back hand and letting it run back and forth through your front hand, but take care not add pressure. Leash handling takes some practice.
- 7) As your dog gets better, you can practice with a shorter leash in more crowded places. Eventually your dog will be able to walk beside you without pulling in places where a short lead is needed.

Dealing with Distractions

The walk is for your scent-centric dog, so make sure he gets to enjoy it as much as possible – the only rule is that he can't drag you. If your dog pulls towards a distraction, the way you respond depends on what the distraction is.

- 1) Okay Distractions** – if your dog is pulling towards something that you don't mind him interacting with, continue to circle every time he puts pressure on the leash, but ensure that your circles gradually take him closer and closer to the object of interest. He will learn that he can go and explore, but that he won't get there if he pulls.
- 2) Not-Okay Distractions** – these may include other animals, rubbish, vehicles, people, or roadkill. The same process applies – circle when the pressure on the leash is too much, but this time use your circle to take him away from the distraction. If he stops and stares, or stalks towards something before lunging at it, interrupt this behaviour by circling BEFORE it turns into a lunge. You need to learn your dog's body language to anticipate what he is about to do so you can step in before things escalate. If a loose dog runs up to you, DON'T CIRCLE – pulling your dog away may trigger a fight.