

# Loose Lead Walking - Join the Dots

This is a leash training method that encourages your dog to pay attention to what you are doing, and to check in on a regular basis. These are also helpful habits for developing a good recall. This method puts all the responsibility for good behaviour into the dog's paws. By letting him choose, you reduce stress, so he is less inclined to act up and try to escape restraint, and by rewarding him for behaviour you like, you are encouraging him to make the choice you want him to. This method can work well with the Circle method – you can stop and reward attention and still circle every time your dog pulls. Just remember to be very consistent about circling every time there is too much leash tension.

**1)** You don't need any equipment for this. As you walk along with your dog, pick out objects that are a few metres apart – lamp posts, letter boxes, trees, road markers, gates, clumps of grass etc. Every time you arrive at one of these objects stop and wait. Chances are your dog will try to haul you forward, become absorbed in a scent, sit and stare into the distance, bark at a passing dog, and generally amuse himself for a short time. Don't speak to him, tug the lead, or make any attempt to get his attention. Remember, it's up to him to make good things happen - he just doesn't know that yet.

Eventually, your dog will look at you to see what the hold-up is. This may take seconds, or many, many minutes. Be patient. The moment you get so much as a glance, praise him and shower him with treats. If you have trained a "yes" marker, use it the instant you get attention, even if you don't get actual eye contact. Then start walking again. Stop at your next pre-determined object and repeat the process. Do this as often as possible. Make sure you also praise and reward any attention he gives you even if you haven't stopped walking – you don't have to wait for the next lamp post. The objects you choose are just a visual reminder to *you* to stop every few metres.

**It will take time for your dog to understand** that when you stop, he can earn a treat by checking in. He needs to overcome a life-long habit of dragging you down the street without acknowledging your existence, and that will take quite a while to change. You may even find that he gets worse for a time. Dogs will often create mental space for themselves when processing new information, by tuning out those around them or appearing unusually interested in their environment instead their loved ones. Don't be tempted to try and get his attention – your intrusion on his thinking time will just create stress and make him even *less* inclined to interact with you.

**During this process, don't ask anything of your dog.** Don't ask for a sit or down, insist he walks beside you, or call him to you. He can even pull as much as he likes. If he is too far away to hand him a treat when he glances at you, throw the treat at his feet rather than call him closer. Just focus on the offer of attention, no matter how brief. However, don't start walking again if he is trying to pull you forward. Move forward while his attention is still on you, or at least while there is no tension on the leash – you may have to wait this out. Keep in mind that continuing the walk is also rewarding, and you want to be signalling to him that pulling you won't get you going again, but paying attention will.

**2)** Once your dog has developed a habit of checking in with you every time you stop, shorten the distance between stops to just three or four paces. Now your dog doesn't really have time to get absorbed in the environment and will start keeping his attention on you for longer periods of time. He may even start walking beside you or at least staying close of his own volition, but this is not required of him – he can walk anywhere he likes as long as he stops when you do and switches his attention on to you. Continue to reward every offer of attention.

**3)** When your dog is mostly focused on you, or at least paying close attention to your movements and immediately stopping with you and offering attention, start increasing the distance between stops. Now you are asking your dog to focus continuously for longer distances. Your dog should now be staying fairly close to you and responding to your actions to see what you are doing and whether there is anything on offer. Don't push the distances too far, just increase them gradually.

**4)** If he is starting to walk beside you without being asked, feed him as you walk as well as stopping. Remember to still let him sniff and explore around, but he will get to the point where he keeps coming back to you to check in. You can start adding a cue to ask him to walk beside you as he moves into position ("heel", "stay here", "side", etc) and reward him for being there, but don't keep him there the whole time. Now he should be responding to any tension on the lead by switching his attention on to you rather than pulling ahead.

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## How to Keep Your Leashed Dog Happy

Many dogs pull on the lead through sheer frustration. Dogs love to run, explore, follow scent trails, play with their friends, scramble, jump, and sniff – all the things that satisfy them physically and mentally, and all the things they can't do when tethered to a human anchor. This frustration can lead to behavioural problems; no matter how much you "walk" your dog, if exercise isn't tailored to his needs and instincts, it won't make him calm and contented.

If your dog has to be leashed most of the time, adapting your walks to better meet his needs is essential, and may make him less inclined to fight restraint every step of the way.

- 1) Let your dog decide what he is going to do when on lead – sniff as long as he likes, follow scent trails, stare at things, head in random directions, roll in the grass etc, rather than demanding he just march along beside you.
- 2) Use a long line (nine or ten metres or more) so he can move about more freely and at different speeds. Put him on a harness rather than a collar to protect his neck from injury if he takes off at speed and is brought up short.
- 3) Choose interesting walks with lots of natural scents – bush tracks, beaches, hill tops, rivers, parks.
- 4) Take him to lots of different and new places, rather than the same route every day. Take him on holiday.
- 5) Challenge his body by having him scramble up banks, over fallen trees, along rough tracks, through water etc.
- 6) Take him to busy places as well as quiet places, as long as this doesn't scare him. Busy street walks can be great fun for dogs that rarely see other dogs or people.
- 7) Walk regularly with a friend who has compatible dogs – dogs love to walk in a pack.
- 8) Do lots of training during the walk – tricks, tracking, conditioning exercises etc – to drain mental energy.
- 9) If you can, take up running so your dog can move at a more natural pace for a few kilometres.
- 10) Work hard on your recall so that off-leash time can happen more often. If aggression is a problem, muzzle him so he can have more freedom.