

LOOSE LEASH WALKING

One of the biggest behaviour issues with domestic dogs is pulling on the leash. No dog owner wants to be taken for a walk!

Sadly for many this is not the case. Their dog is pulling on a tight leash, making for a very uncomfortable and often highly frustrating walk.

Exercising your dog should be a pleasure and having your dog walk beside you on a soft leash definitely makes for a much more relaxed and enjoyable outing.

In this article I will go over some principles and methods that encourage a dog to walk beside you on a soft leash in the 'heel' position.

Firstly it is a good idea to review your lead and collar and the set up that you use to take the dog for a walk.

If the current set up is not working it is a good idea to look at other options.

There is no one size fits all for dogs. Some dogs react nicely to a slip chain, some dogs are calm and submissive on a halti and some are fine wearing a normal flat leather collar.

Personally I encourage my clients to use whatever works. If one option isn't working we will go to another.

It is also worth considering the effect your current lead has on your dog when they see it. The lead can be a cue or stimulus for the dog to lunge ahead and rush out of the house. This behaviour then continues throughout the walk.

The dog is so used to behaving in this manner when the lead appears. The dogs behaviour then becomes a conditioned response to that lead.

Therefore I recommend that if you want to change your dogs on leash manners from a dog that pulls on the lead to a dog that walks beside you on a soft lead that you invest in a new lead and collar.

You can then create a new response and history with your new set up and equipment. The new rules start immediately with the new gear. We then eliminate the conditioned response of over exuberant, undesirable behaviour with the old lead.

The number one rule for good leash manners is: **'Never go with a dog that is pulling on a tight lead'**.

If we break this down and think about it - when the dog is pulling on the lead and we then carry on walking behind them while they have that tension around their neck through the collar, we are reinforcing that behaviour and signalling to the dog that the tension around your neck is the indication to proceed. The dog will then continue to pull on a tight lead.

The dogs that you see walking down the road on a tight lead with the owner behind them having their shoulder almost pulled out of their socket are doing this because this behaviour has been reinforced by the owner continuing to walk behind them when they are pulling. The pulling behaviour has a purpose and a function for the dog - it signals that it is walk time.

We want to create the opposite effect. We want to create an environment where whenever the dog feels tension around their neck they stop or correct themselves so that the tension is removed. We want the dog to have sensitivity to this tension.

How do we do this?

You will need food rewards and we want to use a clicker or a verbal mark such as 'yes' to mark the desirable behaviour.

I start with the dog beside me in the 'heel' position on the left side. The heel position is where the dogs front legs are level with your leg and their head is slightly in front of your leg. When they are in this position the lead will be soft.

You can use the following sequence with dogs of any age and level of leash manners.

I have my lead and clicker in the hand closest to the dog (left) and my food rewards which I can use as a lure in my right hand.

1. Use a new or different lead and collar as outlined above if you have an established lead puller. Remember we are creating a new history and new rules with the new set up.
2. Place the lead and collar on the dog and give the dog the 'heel' command. Walk off with the dog beside you.
3. If the dog walks beside you on a soft lead mark it with your click or verbal mark and immediately deliver your food reward.

4. If the dog moves ahead and begins pulling turn away (if the dog is on your left turn towards the right) from the dog and start walking off in the opposite direction. When the dog is back beside you on a soft lead in the heel position mark it and immediately reward.
5. Continue walking and again if the dog moves ahead of you turn away from the dog in the opposite direction, always marking and rewarding when the dog is beside you in the heel position. We have to show the dog what we want.
6. If you have a dog that stays beside you on a soft lead in the heel position keep marking and rewarding the dog for the desirable behaviour.
7. As the dog starts moving beside you on a soft lead we want to start implementing regular halts. This involves coming to a stop and asking the dog to sit when you stop. If your dog is on your left side ask the dog to sit when your left leg is in mid air as you are just about to plant it. The goal is that your dog has time to go into the sit as you are planting your left foot. Mark it and reward. Then step off with your left leg. A couple of steps later ask for another sit. Keep repeating this. What then occurs is the dog starts keying into your left leg and maintains the heel position more readily in anticipation of coming to another halt.
8. As you progress through this behaviour chain and the dog is moving beside you consistently on a soft lead start turning back into the dog as well as away from the dog (figure 8's). You are teaching the dog to move beside you on a soft lead no matter which way you turn. Continue adding in your halts always marking and rewarding the desirable behaviours.
9. The next behaviour we want to look to add into this sequence is called checking in. This refers to eye contact. When ever the dog gives you eye contact mark it and reward as you are walking. Eye contact encourages the dog to engage with you and look to you for instruction as opposed to a dog being on the end of a tight leash making their own decisions.
10. Keep this behaviour chain moving forward over a week or two marking the desired behaviours of maintaining the heel position, sitting when halting and checking in. Become more demanding of the dog as you progress. Start the exercise in a sterile environment such as your backyard and as the dog progresses start incrementally taking these new skills out into the world ie. the back yard, then in front of your house on the footpath and ultimately out into your walks.

A few things to consider when completing this exercise that make a lot of difference are:

- Ensure that when you deliver your mark (click or yes) that the dog is exactly where you want them - beside you in the heel position.
- It is important to deliver the food reward where you want the dog positioned. As above your mark should be at the correct moment and it is doubly reinforcing if you deliver the food reward while the dog is in the correct position as well. The dog learns that this is the place to be.
- Use highly palatable and reinforcing food rewards. You want something that your dog really likes which will make your rewards more reinforcing. I use Ziwi food rewards as they are natural, highly nutritious and they are soft so the dog can chew them quickly allowing us to move straight onto the next reward.
- Mix your reinforcement schedule up to make it more interesting for the dog ie. don't always just give one food reward. Give - two, one, three etc. this makes it way more reinforcing for the dog.

Another question I get asked alot in relation to leash manners is around dogs that are walking nicely on the lead but suddenly pull ahead and walk across their owner to go and sniff a tree or something they find interesting.

The way to avoid this is to set the environment up so that the dog has to go through you to have this sniff time.

Walk up to a tree that your dog usually investigates but on this occasion stop short of it before your dog normally moves forward to investigate. Ask the dog for a sit and when the dog sits mark and reward. Then ask your dog to maintain the sit and wait for a 'check in' (eye contact). As soon as your dog checks in give them a release command such as 'finished' or 'break' which means you can go and investigate the tree this is your time now.

This simple strategy does two things. It gets the dog going through you to have access to the tree or interesting item which promotes your role as the mentor/leader and it ensures that the dog remains in a calm learning state and earns the right to go and investigate as opposed to lunging forward and investigating when they decide too.

As with any training you will get out of this what you put into it. Have fun with these strategies, be consistent and you will make great progress which will ensure that your walks are so much more pleasurable.