

Loose lead walking

It is important that our dogs learn to walk nicely on a lead; it is much more pleasant for us, and it is more pleasant for the dog (as well as meaning that they are less likely to get back, neck or throat problems). If they walk nicely, they won't pull us into the path of oncoming traffic nor will they pull us over if it is slippery underfoot.

We are going to build this in a very methodical manner.

1. Show your dog that you have food in your hand and then lift your hand up out of his reach (by your waist or possibly by your shoulder for a large dog). This shows the dog that there is food on offer to him.
2. With your dog on lead, take one step. If the lead remains slack during this step, then click and reward. The only behaviour we are clicking for at the moment is the lead remaining slack, it doesn't matter what else the dog is doing when we are clicking; only that the lead is slack.
3. You then take 2 steps, clicking and rewarding if the lead remains slack. All we are looking for is that the lead remains slack.
4. Continue increasing by one step at a time, until you reach 300 steps. Once you have achieved 300 steps your dog will have a thorough understanding of what loose lead walking is.
5. If the lead goes tight at any point, then you go right back to the beginning and start at one step again.

Remember that you always click once you reach your desired count (so after 10 steps for instance) and not for every step. When you have taken the required number of steps, click and then stand still whilst you reward your dog. Dogs do seem to struggle to eat and do something at the same time, so we'll give them chance to eat their reward before we set off again.

To change direction, drop the hand containing food down by your dog to remind him what he is working for, and then remove it from his reach again. This will have gained his attention. Now that he is looking at you, turn away from him and go back the way you have just come. Continue to your set count and click/treat if the lead remained loose until you achieved the count.

It is a good idea to count out (quietly) as you walk as that keeps both you and the dog focussed and prevents you from skipping steps. The beauty of this technique is that it is easy to do whilst you are exercising your dog on his day to day walks and they learn to walk on a loose lead as an automatic behaviour, but don't expect that just yet as we have a few more steps to go first.

Repeat several times a day and in several different places. The time and effort we put in now whilst they are puppies is going to pay huge dividends when they are fully grown as even a 10lb dog pulling on a lead can cause us significant damage to our back and shoulders, let alone the damage they are doing to themselves.

When you first start this, you will probably get 3 or 4 steps before the dog tightens the lead and you reset the count (i.e. go back to 1 step). You may have to reset the count several times before you progress past a count of 10. Don't give up, just work through it. This problem often occurs if the dog has a long history of pulling on the lead. Just remember to keep the lead at a fixed length and to not try to hold the dog back with the lead (if we provide them something to pull against; then pull they will!).

I usually begin with the food reward in my hand (but not at the dog's nose height) so that the dog is aware that it is there and available for earning. When the dog keeps the lead loose for the required count, then the food is dropped just behind my legs. As the count increases (after about 60 steps upwards), the food is delivered from a treat bag and isn't kept in my hand.

You may walk 85 steps or more in order to achieve that count of 10 in the beginning, but as the dog grasps the idea; it will begin offering the behaviour more frequently and readily. Don't be surprised if the dog begins to experiment and you get barking, sideways movement, the dog watching you or any other behaviour.

As the dog gets more proficient, you can ask for other behaviours as well as a loose lead, you may want the dog to stay close to your leg, you may want it to 'check in' with you (i.e. look at you) occasionally, just extend your count slightly to ensure that you get both the loose lead and the looking at you behaviours.

You may find a sticking point at around 60-80 paces. Just work through it even though it feels like you are never going to get past this step, the results make it all worthwhile in the end. Once you get to 100 steps or so, you can probably increase in increments of 5 or 10 steps rather than just one, just be prepared to go a little slower if the dog starts to get it wrong.

Remember to be consistent...every time you take the dog out on a lead, then it must walk on a loose lead, you will soon begin to reap the benefits even if it seems like an uphill battle to begin with.