



Pulling on the leash

Most pet parents struggle with their leash walk with their dogs, but why is that? The majority of the issues I encounter with clients who are struggling with a leash walk is that they are trying to hold their dog in place with a tight leash. When they want their dog to move or come towards them they pull the leash to reel the dog in, and to get the dog's attention they pull back on the leash to create leash tension.

Your leash is on your dog to make sure they don't run away, but it shouldn't be your first means of communication with your dog. Also, I would like to point out: *there is no quick fix for a perfect leash walk.*

There are many tools to make the training process more successful, but the "no-pull" harness or "no-pull" headcollar does not create a good leash walk. Training does! The no-pull tools make it less comfortable for the dog to pull, but it does not create any focus between you and your dog.

Do you ever feel like an anchor on the end of your dog's leash? It's because in that moment, you are. Without teaching your dog that you are in control of where you go—and that they must look back and acknowledge you to go where they want—you will remain an anchor.

Leash walks like this are very unpleasant for you, which makes you want to walk your dog less. This can lead to pent-up energy from the dog, making the leash walk worse. How frustrating! So let's get started, breaking this down into small steps so you can enjoy walking your dog.



The real first step of the leash walk: GETTING THE LEASH

Most people picture the beginning of their walk as the moment they walk out the front door, but let's take a few steps back. Most leashes are stored in a drawer, a closet, or on a hook. When you walk towards that area what does your dog do? Do their eyes get big? Do they get super excited and maybe jump or even run a lap around the house? Usually, the answer here is yes, so with all the excitement and joy this brings to your dog, this is one of the ultimate rewards.

Whatever behavior you reward will get stronger. So if you attach the leash to an overly excited dog who has very little concern about dragging you out the front door, that's what you're rewarding, and that behavior will get stronger. So what behavior would you like here? A calm dog that comes up and sits politely for you to attach the leash? Then that is the behavior you are going to reward.



To achieve this, start by making the leash less of a big deal. We usually only get it out when it's time to go for a walk. So try getting it out more. Drape it around your neck and cook dinner and then put it back. Vacuum the house and then put it back. Read a book or watch tv and then put it away. If your dog is jumping and running around, ignore it. Once they are calm, mark with a YES and toss them a piece of kibble. Building calm around the leash is a very important step, so take your time with this. Do it 3 times a day for a week, and your dog won't be sure what you're going to do when you get the leash out.

If you're going to get the leash to take your dog for a walk, be mindful of what you reward. The click you hear when it attaches to their gear is a very rewarding sound. Let that click be a snapshot in your mind of what behavior you are rewarding. If your dog is too worked up just wait, once they start to calm down begin to reach towards their collar, if this sends them into over-excitement again, back off and stand up. Wait again for another calm moment, and if you are consistent with this, your dog will make an effort to stay calm so you can attach the leash.



The leash is on, let's go! Wait a minute....

Now that you have the leash attached you have come to the next obstacle of the walk: the door. Again picture your dog walking out the door as a snapshot of the behavior you want on your walk. If they burst through the door and drag you with them, you are setting yourself up for an unpleasant walk.

I would like to point out first that this approach has nothing to do with being the alpha. I encourage you to step out the door first and then invite your dog to join you, but this is not so you are dominant over your dog. This should happen so your dog can learn impulse control and to look to you for guidance—that is all.

So to get started, have your dog sit by you as you place your hand on the handle of the door. If your dog gets up, take your hand off the handle and wait for them to sit again. Turn the handle on the door and begin slowly opening the door. If at any time your dog starts to stand up to move towards the door, just close the door. You don't need to say "no," or "sit," or "stay" here, this should be a default response to any door, so it's good to do this quietly and let your dog problem solve this. You may need to open and close the door 2 times, 5 times, or 50 times. What you're looking for is an open door with a dog that isn't trying to run past you. Once you're ready, step out the door and then invite your dog to come with you.

Woohoo we're outside!!

Ok, we made it. We're outside with a calm-minded dog. Now, don't lose all the focus and calm you've built by letting them start pulling. Start with some u-turns, back and forth over and over. If you live in an apartment go up and down the hallway first. If you're in a house, walk your sidewalk over and over.

We're looking to build focus here. When your dog is at your side and looks up to you, mark it with a YES and give them a treat. Only reward while you are in motion or you will get caught



in a yo-yo walk. Your dog hits the end of the leash you call them back and reward them over and over. If your dog pulls on the leash at all, and I do mean *at all*—the smallest amount of tension—turn and go the other way.

You may walk from your house to your neighbor's house 15 times before you can move on further. Don't worry about going around the block or getting to a certain point just yet. If you start working your dog from your house to your neighbors' and have the best leash walk you've ever had, that's great!

Add more distance a little at a time. You'll notice when you try to go farther they may begin pulling a lot more; or when you go to a new place they are very excited by the new environment so they are pulling more than usual. This is completely normal, but do not let them pull. When you make your quick turns, do

it deliberately, don't start to turn and wait to see if they want to come with you, just turn say "let's go" and walk the other walk quickly.

There should only be pressure on your leash when you turn to go the other way. it is extremely important that you immediately release the leash pressure once they turn and stay with you. If you do not release the pressure they will not understand the point of any of this, and will not learn to not pull on the leash, because you are keeping constant pressure on them. The point is for your dog to learn there is only forward motion when there is no leash tension.

Your dog won't stop pulling on the leash if you don't

Releasing the leash pressure is tough for most people at first. Most people stand with their dog right next to them, pulling up on the leash to create tension even if their dog isn't trying to leave. If you do this all the time, your dog does not understand leash pressure.

To be able to teach leash pressure, you have to get off the leash. Relax your arm with your dog at your side, give them as much leash as you are comfortable with them being away from you. A small dog might get 2 feet of the leash, and a medium dog about 1 foot, a large dog 6-8 inches. Keep your arm completely relaxed, you should feel like you're holding an empty leash, and your dog shouldn't feel you on the other end either.

Again, your leash is a backup if they wander, it is not how you want to communicate with them. When you are working with any dog, with or without a leash, you want to communicate through eye contact, body language, and then verbally (cues).

If your dog is getting a few steps ahead of you, don't wait for them to hit the end of the leash, use kissy sounds, say their name, or pat the side of your leg to encourage them to get closer to you and if they do reward that. Leash pressure should only be felt on and off quickly to make that U-turn if needed, the idea here is that your dog relates pressure to move towards you instead of trying to pull harder to get to what they want.



Does my dog need to be at my side the whole walk?

Nope, they sure don't, and it should be more freedom than being at your side. Freedom does not mean pulling though. You can reward your dog with the freedom of the entire leash length, but if they pull, immediately stop moving. All the rules still apply.

So let me give you an example of what a leash walk can look like. We walk out the front door and my dog is a bit excited. I do some u-turns until he is looking up at me and staying at my side. We start heading down the block and he is doing great, staying with me and checking in so I reward him with some freedom. I use my cue "free" and step towards his favorite tree so he can smell and explore for a few minutes. Once we're done there I use my cue "with me" and call him back to my side. He continues to do very well so I mark with a YES and give him a couple of treats.

This would continue on and off throughout the walk. At your side for a few minutes, and then a few minutes to sniff. Sniffing is how your dog explores the world, so it is important to let them do this. Always remember your snapshot, right before you say "free" what was he doing? Whatever that is that's what you're rewarding, so don't let them drag you to sniff something.



Tips and tricks

- Your dog will be as consistent as you are
- Don't take your dog pulling personally
- We as humans walk slowly compared to dogs, it is normal for an untrained dog to pull on a leash
- Take time to work calm before you walk out the door
- When crossing an intersection or a parking lot where you can't stop or do a U-turn use the magnet hand (a handful of treats to the nose)