



## Walking Your Dog on a Loose Leash

*Information adapted from original article in the 5/2017 issue of the Whole Dog Journal by Nancy Tucker, CPDT-KA*

No one enjoys walking with a dog that constantly pulls. It's terribly unpleasant and in some cases can be downright dangerous. Dog owners often end up avoiding walking with their dog altogether, which inadvertently can make the problem worse – the less often the dog gets to go for a walk, the more excited he becomes when he eventually does get to go, the faster he walks, and the stronger he pulls! It's a vicious circle.

Walking with a dog on leash can look like many different things: dog on the left in a traditional "heeling" position, dog on the right, dog in the front, dog zig-zagging with his nose to the ground . . . and all are correct, as long as there is no tension in the leash. The goal is walking harmoniously with your dog – and "checking in" is the key ingredient to creating the type of relationship that is conducive to harmonious walks. You can help your dog develop the habit of frequently checking in with you simply by reinforcing the behavior.

If your dog already pulls on leash, you'll want to begin training the "check-in" behavior in a location with low distractions. In other words, start where your dog is most likely to succeed at looking at you. If he's very excited about being out for a walk, he'll probably be too distracted to start learning a new behavior in that context, so avoid starting the training while actually out walking.

### **"CHECK-IN" TRAINING OVERVIEW**

- Help your dog develop a habit of checking in with you. Start where he won't easily be distracted.
- Reward your dog each time he spontaneously glances at you throughout the day.
- Prepare some small yummy treats in advance and put your dog on leash. Stand quietly and mark and treat every glance toward you until your dog is focused on you.
- Take the game outside in a low-distraction area. Mark and treat any effort your dog makes to pay even the slightest attention to you. Be patient.
- Practice stepping outside with your dog so he learns to look at you and wait while you lock the door.
- Make it easy for your dog to choose to pay attention to you, so he gets as many opportunities for reinforcement as possible!

Granted, there are lots of different reward-based methods to teach loose-leash walking, and success is often the result of a combination of several positive techniques. "Checking in" is just one ingredient in a training recipe, yet it's an important one and is a useful part of any loose-leash walking training program.

The way to teach your dog to “check in” with you frequently is to heavily and frequently reinforce this behavior – first, at home, and, increasingly, out in the world. You’ll find that not only does your dog enjoy walks more, but also, your enjoyment of these walks will increase exponentially as your dog pulls less and pays more attention to you.

### **Loose Leash Walking Rules**

There are a few fundamental elements to loose-leash walking that will make the activity much more enjoyable for everyone involved. If you follow these basic rules, you will be more likely to succeed:

- **Be present!** You’ve probably heard this before, but it’s worth repeating: Being present means putting your phone away during walks. You’re asking your dog to curb his enthusiasm for his version of social media – the kind he “reads” with his nose – in order to be more connected to you during your walk. The least you can do is be available to respond to his “check-ins” by paying attention. This also applies to times when you walk your dog with a friend. Chatting is lots of fun, but keep an eye on your dog and make him a priority – at least during the training period.

- **Carry rewards.** Never under-estimate the usefulness of a treat pouch filled with at least a handful of yummy bits of food! My dog Chili already walks politely on leash and she has the check-in behavior down pat, but guess what? I still carry treats with me on every single walk we take. I continue to randomly capture and reward behaviors I like, and once in a while I’ll play a game of “find it” with Chili while we walk by tossing treats on the ground and letting her sniff around to find them.

- **Let your dog sniff.** Few dogs get adequate daily physical exercise from an on-leash walk. We humans move much too slowly for that (unless you’re running with your dog, of course). That doesn’t mean that the walk isn’t an important part of your dog’s day – it’s a crucial information-gathering activity! Allow your dog to follow his nose. Let him investigate the scents he picks up, even if that means pausing for a moment while he inspects a blade of grass.

Keeping these important elements in mind, it’s time to starting using the check-in behavior to teach your dog to walk politely on leash.

**TIP:** Trainers often recommend that we stop moving forward if there is tension in the leash. The logic behind this is that by stopping we avoid reinforcing a pulling behavior. This technique is often successful in helping a dog learn not to pull; if he wants to move forward, he has to keep the leash slack.

Start reinforcing your dog for keeping the leash loose and checking in with you immediately! It helps him understand what behavior will be rewarded on this walk, and sets him up for success.

## **Checking In with Your Dog on a Walk**

By now you will have already heavily reinforced the check-in behavior that your dog has been offering you in low-distraction scenarios. It's time to increase the difficulty a notch or two by taking the behavior on the road – literally.

Ideally, take your dog to a relatively quiet spot to walk. I drive to walking paths that offer quiet space for me and my dog to connect more easily. If this isn't an option for you, work with what you've got. Practicing in an area with lots of distractions might require extra patience on your part. If you work in an area that makes it more challenging for your dog to offer you the behaviors you want, his efforts should also be rewarded more frequently and generously. Big effort, big pay!

With your dog on a six-foot leash and a well-stocked treat pouch at the ready, give your dog the cue to start moving forward with you – I like to say “Let's go!” – and start walking. Since the goal is for the leash to remain slack at all times, follow the steps below to help your dog understand the game.

### **1. Start Reinforcing Your Dog Immediately**

Seize the moment! While your dog is still near you and before he ever gets the chance to bolt forward and tighten the leash, quickly say, “Yes!” and offer him a treat. Avoid reaching toward your dog; instead, deliver the treat close to your body. Why offer a treat right out of the gate? Well, in those first few seconds the leash was still slack, and that's the goal, so don't miss the opportunity to highlight that good behavior!

### **2. Try to Reward Your Dog in Motion**

I like to mark and deliver a reward while still in motion, if possible, even if it means I'm moving very slowly. It can feel a bit awkward at first while you get used to the coordination required to mark, reward, and walk at the same time. If it's a bit too much to juggle at first, it's okay to stop to deliver the treat. However, you should work your way toward staying in motion. After all, your dog really wants to move forward, and frequent stopping might lead to some frustration, even if it's for a treat.

### **3. Talk to Your Dog While Walking**

Use your voice to stay connected with your dog while walking. I find that the dogs I work with are more likely to shoot a glance my way if they hear my voice. As we're walking, I might say with a happy tone, “Where should we go today?” Or, if the dog has found something interesting to sniff I might say, “Ooh, whatcha got there?” or anything to encourage a response from the dog. If I get a tail wag or an ear flick, I'll take that as a sign of interest and I'll add a little more excitement to my tone. That will usually elicit a glance my way, and bingo! – I've got something to mark and reward.

As you move forward, feel free to whistle or make a kissy sound to encourage your dog to look at you. When he does, mark with a “Yes!” and reward with a treat. Repeat frequently, say, every six to 10 steps, always in motion if possible. Every time you deliver a treat, let your dog know he can return to walking and sniffing as he was (“Let’s go!”).

If you wonder whether you’ve done enough repetitions of attracting his attention with noises, try staying quiet as you walk. If he checks in with you of his own volition, you know he’s caught on! Mark and treat his spontaneous check-ins, and tell him the walk is still on (“Let’s go!”).

As long as he doesn’t lunge and drag you toward something he’s interested in, it’s ok to allow your dog to take a moment now and again to sniff; it vastly increases his enjoyment of the walk.

### **Keep Reinforcing Your Dog**

I mentioned earlier that I still reward my own dog for behaviors that I like when we walk together. She is no longer in training, but I continue to reinforce the check-in behavior in order to maintain it, either with food or with a few upbeat words.

Checking in is such a friendly habit, and it’s no different from what we already do when walking and talking with a friend. Every now and then, we’ll turn our head to the side to look at our friend as she speaks. It shows we’re listening and it keeps us connected. Keep that connection strong with your own dog, and you’ll see his leash-walking skills grow quickly.

### **Common Leash Training Issues**

**Your dog just isn’t checking in with you:** If your dog was previously checking in with you in your home and on your front doorstep, as described in last month’s article, then the distractions might just be too much for your dog. If you’re unable to practice in a quieter area, try making the exercise easier. Rather than walking a long distance, stay within a few yards and keep covering the same area over and over again. That particular area will no longer be as exciting to your dog and it will become easier to capture his attention. This should offer you more opportunities to reinforce the behavior you want.

**Your dog is pulling too far ahead of you:** To help your dog pay closer attention to you while walking on leash, change directions frequently. This should never be done by suddenly pivoting and jerking the leash. Always let your dog know you’re about to change directions by teaching him a cue – I like to use “This way!” Slow down gradually and say your cue. Stop walking and wait for your dog to turn back to see why you’ve stopped. This may take a moment; be patient. When he looks back at you, mark the check-in with a “Yes!” and when your dog starts to walk toward you to get his treat, start moving in the new direction. As he catches up with you, deliver the treat and say, “Let’s go!” Repeat this exercise often, and always gently. Your dog will soon figure out that “This way!” indicates you’re about to change directions, and he’ll more easily check in with you.

**Your dog is checking in too much:** Oops! Your dog has taken the check-in behavior very seriously and now walks with his head turned toward you, staring. While we do want our dogs to be connected with us when we walk, this is a bit over the top. Encourage your dog to resume walking normally by saying your forward-motion cue (“Let’s go!”). This cue will come to mean that there is no reinforcer coming at the moment, so just keep walking.