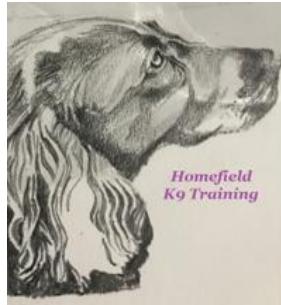


Homefield K9 Training

<https://homefieldk9training.co.uk/>

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Loose Lead Walking

Why is it so hard to teach some dogs to walk on a lead without pulling your arm out of its socket and half-strangling themselves?

Well, partly because walking at our pace isn't something that comes naturally to a lot of pups. They want to get where they're going – and if they have learnt that the 8am outing takes them to the field where they have loads of fun, then they want to get there as quickly as possible. Why wouldn't they?

The trouble is, that besides the potential shoulder problems you might develop, and the complete impossibility of actually controlling a big, strong Labrador or Mastiff that decides he would like to go this way, now, thank you, pulling on a lead, especially when attached to a collar, can cause some significant health problems for dogs.



I know all too well what can happen when you have a determined puller – my lovely Irish Setter, Riley, spent his whole life desperate to get from A to B as fast as he could, despite all the methods I found and tried to prevent it. I wasn't a trainer then, and I'm not proud of some of the techniques I was persuaded to try – and the thing is, none of them actually worked. He still pulled, or at least tried to; and he developed hyperthyroidism and megaoesophagus in his later years.

There are so many delicate structures in the neck and throat: the trachea, the oesophagus and the larynx, the thyroid gland, among others. It's not hard to imagine that prolonged pulling (and yanking the dog back on a collar or slip lead) can cause potentially serious damage.

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So – how do we teach a dog to walk at a steady pace on a loose lead, without doing us or themselves any harm?



Equipment

This is the first consideration. No equipment will prevent or cure pulling – no matter what the manufacturer or retailer tells us. If you use a 'no-pull' harness, or a slip lead, it might reduce; but at what cost to your relationship with your pup? I don't want to use pain and discomfort to teach my dog, and that's what these items do. And, to be honest, they very rarely work – take the item off and the dog will still pull.



A well-fitting Y-shaped harness will not, contrary to some advice out there, encourage the dog to pull on the lead. Harnesses designed for pulling, such as those used for sled dogs and Canicross, are differently designed; standard Y-shape harnesses protect the dog's neck from pressure. Additionally, some feature a front D-ring as well as a back one, so there is the option to attach a double-ended training lead to both points, giving the handler a little more control with a dog that lunges ahead, rather like reins.

I like to use a lead of approximately 2m – this length is within most local restrictions and allows the dog to move without constant tension, which can make a surprising amount of difference. A training lead typically has several rings along its length so that you can shorten it if necessary: 1m for 'pavement walking', 2m for sniffing and 1.5m for relaxed movement, for example.



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Focus Games

Practise focus games in the house and garden first until your dog is responding 98% of the time, then try them just outside the front door. This will help her focus on you rather than the environment. Gradually increase the distance away from home, always being prepared to take a step back if she is struggling to engage with you in places where she doesn't feel confident; ideally you need to build some 'muscle memory' of doing these things where she feels safe and isn't as distracted.

- **The 1-2-3 game:** start by 'charging' the word *three* by saying it quite loudly and clearly then feeding without asking her to do anything else (i.e. don't ask her for a sit or anything else, just say the word and feed). Repeat a few times then add *two*, still feeding on *three*. Then, add *one*. Proof this by grabbing about five treats randomly through the day when you have 30 seconds, repeating *one - two - three* and feeding a treat on *three*. You should soon start to see that as you reach *two*, if not before, her head will start to turn. When she is reacting to this regularly, start trying it when she is distracted by a smell, toy or something – the test will be if this gets her attention. Once this is working well, you can start trying it outside the house.



- Eye contact: reward with food for giving you eye contact. It's as simple as that! If your pup is making eye contact with you, they can't pull on the lead!

- **Hand touch:** teach him to touch his nose to your hand on cue, beginning by rewarding any movement towards your palm and gradually asking for a more definite contact.
- **Middle:** teach your pup to circle round behind you and sit between your legs, facing the same direction as you. Use two treats, one to reward for being in position, the other to release in front of you.
- **Puppy Press-Ups:** using a lure to start with until your dog will respond to the verbal/visual cue, ask him for a sit, a down, back up into a sit and then to stand. This is great for mental and physical exercise – it gets him focusing on the cues.



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You may be wondering what all these tricks have to do with walking nicely on the lead! The idea is to teach your dog to engage with you on cue, so that when they become distracted by the big, exciting world, you have a chance of regaining their attention, because all these exercises have been well-rewarded on many occasions.

Calm Exits



If your dog rushes out of the front door or gate before you, already hyped up and raring to go, chances are you're going to have a dog that's dragging you down the street! It's important to set the tone before you leave the house, so grab a handful of treats and reward eye contact, sit-wait and impulse control to slow things down. Ask your pup to wait (you may want to ask them to sit, to start with, but it won't always be necessary) and begin to open the door. If they move towards it, close it again. Repeat this as many times as it takes to leave the house calmly; you will probably also want them to wait while you close and lock up.

Depending on the entrance to your house, you may need to repeat this process again at the gate – be prepared for leaving home to take a while! But once your dog has learned that leaving with you, rather than dragging you out, is the way to get his walk, life should become easier and you're setting the tone for the outing.

Notice that, once you have rewarded some focus games inside the house and some nice waiting at the door, you won't use treats for the getting-outside process; this is based on the Premack Principle*, the reward being to go outside once those impulses to rush are more under control.

- *A more desirable activity can be used to reinforce a less-desirable one.*



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Lead handling

If your dog is pulling on the lead, there can be a lot of tension – if you pull them back, that doubles the tension. Whatever the reason for the dog pulling (excitement, arousal, fear, for example), tension is going to exacerbate this. If you’re strong enough to drag your dog back to you, then they’re not in front any more – *for that minute*. If your dog is a large, strong breed, you may not be able to pull them back. Either way, pulling them back is not going to solve the problem.

On the other hand, we don’t want the dog to succeed in dragging us to whatever they’re excited about reaching, because that will reinforce the pulling; it’s more likely to be repeated because it worked! So – I’ve found that the best way to approach this situation is to hold the lead steady so that your dog is not getting anywhere, then use an attention sound or their name to attract them back to you. Praise as soon as you see the head turn, using an upbeat, cheerful tone: “Yes, well done!” and take a couple of small steps backwards to encourage him back to you.



When he is back in the desired position, you can resume walking. I don’t use a food reward at this point, as plenty of dogs catch on very quickly to lunging in front, coming back for a treat then lunging off again. The reward in this instance is to continue moving forward (which is what is motivating the dog in the first place); if they maintain a nice loose lead and acceptable pace for three or four steps and are making eye contact, that’s when they get a treat.



This whole process can take a lot of repetitions before you start seeing real improvements – particularly if the dog has been pulling for a long time. It takes patience by the bucketful! But dogs, after all, do what works, and if you can be consistent, they will learn that walking steadily by the side of the annoyingly-slow human gets them to their destination; pulling on the lead gets them nowhere.

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Reward Placement and Delivery

I use a lot of treats, if necessary, when teaching loose lead walking. I think some people wonder if they're condemned to feeding their dog every three steps for the rest of their life! But this is absolutely not the case - if a dog is finding it very difficult to walk at the pace we're asking, then I make it worth their while to do so, and this might mean high-value treats every two or three steps to begin with. As their focus improves and they decide that the handler is at least as interesting as all the things that are distracting them, I can start to slow down this delivery; but I will randomise it so that they might get a treat after four steps, then sixteen, then two, and so on. This creates the gambling mindset that we are looking for, which is more likely to keep the dog interested.



Treats need to be popped into the dog's mouth quickly and efficiently, so that they and we can concentrate on walking without tripping or bumping into anything. It really helps to move your hand straight to the dog's mouth, then back up to your middle; don't hover the next one a few inches above pup's head or they may well start jumping up to get them. This hand by your middle can also become a visual signal for calm walking at heel in the future.

What about tall people and tiny dogs? To avoid chronic backache, **Magic Hand** is a great way of rewarding without having to constantly bend over; drop the rewards on the ground instead of feeding to the mouth, making sure that they fall beside or just behind your foot so that you're not inadvertently encouraging the pup to be in front of you.



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Taking it out on the road

A few exercises to help with this; again, the exercises need practising at home so that your dog learns in a low-distraction environment before making it more difficult.



- **Drunk Dog Walking:** take three steps backwards and reward your dog for following you, then three steps sideways, then diagonally and so on. Any direction is fine, you're just building value in her being close to you.

- **Off-lead heel:** getting him walking beside you at home without a lead helps to practise the position. Again, use food rewards to encourage this.



- **Lead-handling:** keep the lead as long as you can manage, as short leads tend to encourage pulling (as do extending leads, because the mechanics of how they work mean that the dog has to pull in order to move forwards); try to hold the lead in the opposite hand to the side the dog is (so if your dog walks on your left, hold the lead in your right hand) and reward where you want her to be. If you feed treats from the opposite side, you tend to get the dog coming round in front of you in anticipation, or you stop to feed so miss the opportunity to show the dog that the reward is for walking.

- The **300 Peck** game: grab a handful of treats and reward after one step with a loose lead, then two, then three and so on. You're gradually spacing out the rewards further and further. As soon as he pulls, you go back to one. This means that as soon as he is finding it too hard, you're immediately increasing the rate of reinforcement. It's a great way of challenging yourself as well as you can keep track of how many steps you're up to.

Loose Lead Walking is not a quick process to teach! Be consistent, be patient, and if you need help then get in touch! The basics are covered in classes and for more targeted support, I also offer 1-2-1 sessions.