



# Loose Leash Walking

## Understanding the Challenge

### Why dogs pull on leash:

- Dogs walk faster than humans
- Environment is full of rewards (smells, sights, sounds)
- Movement itself is rewarding, especially for young, energetic dogs
- We accidentally reward pulling when dogs get what they want by pulling forward

*Remember: Leash walking is a combination of skills that takes time to learn. Being attached to their human isn't intuitive for most dogs—be patient and practice consistently!*

## Meet Physical Exercise Needs First

For most young, healthy dogs, a leashed walk alone doesn't meet their physical exercise needs. Try to meet their physical needs **before** before practicing leash skills:

- **Interactive play:** flirt pole, tug, fetch
- **Off-leash time:** If your dog is still learning recall, try the single-use dog parks at Santa Fe Animal Shelter for safe exercise
- **Recall practice:** hide-and-seek or "ping-pong" recall between family members
- **Agility / parkour:** Practice on makeshift courses in your house or yard using furniture (couch, tables, etc.), rocks, stumps etc
- **Dog-to-dog play** (if your dog enjoys it with appropriate playmates)

## Use the Right Equipment

**Always bring treats!** This lets you reward good behavior, and compete with all the rewards in the environment.

**Long leash (8-15 feet instead of 6 feet):** Not for busy urban environments, but when walking in a safe environment (park, trail), using a longer leash can help reduce pulling. Dogs can reach interesting smells without pulling, so good sniffs are no longer rewarding the pulling behavior

**Front-clip harness.** If your dog is big and strong, a front clip harness can make it safer for you to walk them. It won't stop pulling, but it will help redirect the dog to the side instead of pulling you forward. The [Freedom Harness](#) is a good choice for most dogs.

## Alternate Between Two Modes

### "Dog Mode" (Freedom periods):

- Let your dog sniff and explore on quiet streets, grass, or parks
- Play "Find It!" game by tossing treats for nose work

### "Human Mode" (Structure periods):

- Ask for close walking on busy sidewalks, crossings, or when passing other dogs
- Give treats at your hip when you want your dog close

## Training Skills

💡 **Start at home in a quiet environment and only introduce real-world distractions once your dog is having success.** All of the skills below can be worked on at the same time - they build on each other naturally.

### The Take-Out Window

*This applies to every skill below — always deliver treats this way.*

Always reward next to your hip on the side where you want your dog to walk. When you mark "Yes!", get the treat out but hold it at your hip so your dog has to move into position to collect it. This teaches your dog that being close to your side is always where the good stuff is.

### Rewarding Check-Ins

- **Capture automatic check-ins:** Any time your dog looks back at you on a walk, mark "Yes!" and reward at your hip. (*Video demo - off leash but applies to on leash as well:* <https://www.youtube.com/shorts/qVzeXGws0Qk> )
- **Practice with distractions:** When your dog notices something (another dog, a person) and then looks back at you, mark and reward — this is a big deal!
- **When your dog hits the end of the leash: Stop, cheerfully ask for a check-in, and reward at your hip** when they return their attention to you. If needed, use a hand target to bring them all the way back into position. Over time your dog will learn that a tight leash means check in — not pull harder.

### Teaching the Heel Position

Video demo: <https://youtu.be/mfQhpr47HLI?feature=shared&t=133>

- Use your **hand target** to guide your dog into a heel position at your side.
- Mark and reward at your hip (take-out window!) every time your dog is in position.

## The 'Good or Go' Game

[Video demo](#) [exercise runs from 25:00 to 27:00]

This game teaches your dog to only move forward when you give the cue - so walking with you becomes a cooperative choice, not a pulling contest.

- Start with the [offered attention game](#) while standing still in heel position. Reward every check-in with a treat at your hip.
- Once your dog is reliably checking in, occasionally replace your marker with a **movement cue** (e.g. "Let's go" or "With me").
- Say the cue, take **one step**, then stop and reward at your hip.
- Mix it up — sometimes mark and reward for the check-in, sometimes use the cue and take a step. Your dog will learn to wait for the cue before moving forward.

## The 'Connect the Dots' Game

*Video demo:* <https://youtu.be/383bIPuuGO8?si=ueoQIX4oRMmacXy3>

Now that your dog understands the movement cue, start building actual walking together.

- Begin taking **multiple steps** instead of just one — but reward very frequently at your hip before your dog has a chance to get ahead and pull.
- Place **markers on the ground** (cones, painter's tape) at regular intervals to remind yourself to reward every time you pass one. This keeps the rate of reinforcement high early on.
- **Introduce distractions gradually**, as always — new environment or distraction means going back to frequent rewards until your dog finds their rhythm there too. (*Video demo with distractions:* [https://youtu.be/OyWDFd5\\_93Y?si=Ai6uCX-n-1-kq93Y](https://youtu.be/OyWDFd5_93Y?si=Ai6uCX-n-1-kq93Y))
- Once your dog is walking consistently without pulling, start **spacing out the rewards** — for example, if you're on a pavement, first reward at every crack, then every other one, then every few.

## Prevention is Key!

Get ahead of mistakes and reward when the leash is still loose before your dog pulls. When you see a distraction your dog can't handle without pulling, you can use these techniques to get past the distraction or trigger

- **U-Turn:** Change direction before your dog gets fixated
- **Treat magnets:** Use high-value treats right at their nose to lure them away from the distraction
- **Treat scatters/"Find It":** Toss treats on ground to help break your dog's focus on the distraction