

Clicker Training Polite Leash Walking

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For many clients, loose leash walking is the holy grail of pet dog manners, their number one training priority. Many pet owners can train a “sit” or “down” behavior relatively easily with the use of a food lure, but few know how to teach their dog to walk politely on a loose leash. An increasing number of trainers are offering courses focusing specifically on this one critical life skill. It certainly has been a popular offering in my own foundation-level classes.

Although I teach my classes in a levels-type format, I will share a four-week teaching plan that can be used as a framework for developing your own loose leash walking mini-course! If you do not choose to use a clicker in your classes, assist your students in selecting and conditioning an appropriate alternative marker.

Week One: Beginnings

I. Discussion/Handout: Why Do Dogs Pull On Leash?

Students frequently insist that their dogs pull on leash because they are “stubborn” or “stupid.” In actuality, pulling on the leash usually results from a combination of the following: lack of reinforcement history for the appropriate behavior (walking politely), reinforcement history for pulling (dogs pull because “it works”), and opposition reflex on both ends of the leash (what I like to call the “Pushmi-pullyu Effect”). Students should be encouraged to focus on how their own actions can improve their dog’s behavior on the leash, as this understanding promotes a better relationship than the “my dog is dumb/stubborn/can’t do this” mentality.

II. Exercise 1 – Feeding for Position

- Whenever possible, dogs should be tethered during this exercise so that students may focus on their own skills without a lunging dog’s leash in their hand.
- Students should be instructed to choose which side of their body they would like their dog to walk on and will hold their treats in the same hand. (Default is left side, but students should be encouraged to select whatever is most comfortable for them). The clicker will go in the student’s opposite hand. For the purposes of this article, we will assume that our student has chosen to teach her dog to walk on her left side.
- In previous mechanics articles, we’ve discussed “home base.” In this exercise, because opposition reflex will come into play, our student will need two home bases, one for her treat hand and one for her leash/clicker hand. I like the “treat hand home base” to be at the handler’s navel and the “leash hand home base” to be against the thigh on the right side of the handler’s body.
- Once our student has loaded her treat hand and has both hands at the appropriate home base, instruct the student to click (keeping her right hand against her right thigh) and drop her left hand from her navel to



Proper leash and clicker handling.

deliver the treat at the seam of her left pant legs. She should then immediately return her treat hand to home base. Repeat 5 to 10 times.

NOTE: If you have a taller student working with a very short dog, consider using a soft treat like peanut butter smeared on the inside of a wooden spoon. Handlers can then drop this down to the dog’s head level without twisting or bending. Otherwise, patterns can develop where toy breed dogs will jump after hearing the click, in anticipation of a treat delivered higher than they are able to reach with all four paws on the ground.

NOTE: For owners of nippy dogs, have the owner practice dropping the treat on the ground near their ankle/heel. Work on nipping in a separate training session.

III. Exercise 2: 90° Rotations

- Once your student is comfortable with the mechanical skills of keeping her clicker hand against her body, have her work on rotations. In this exercise, each time the treat hand is returned to home base, the student will rotate her body $\frac{1}{4}$ turn, stop, click, and “feed at the seam.”
- Our student may need one or more TAGpoints to help remind her to keep her clicker hand against her body, or for appropriate placement of the treat.
- The student should be instructed to keep her treat hand still once she has dropped it into position at the seam. The dog should come to the treat, not the other way around.

IV. Exercise 3: Start Moving!

- Now that the student understands the mechanical skills involved and we’ve built a reinforcement history for the appropriate position, she can begin taking one step, stopping, clicking, and dropping her treat into position.
- To help students remember the steps, I call this “Stop. Click. Drop.” Stop moving. Click. Drop your treat into position.
- Encourage your student to take steps in various directions – backwards, diagonally, sideways.
- Encourage student to take multiple steps.

V. Exercise 4: Introducing the Leash

- Demonstrate the appropriate leash hold. Instruct the

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student to hold her right hand so that four fingers are together with the thumb sticking up, and loop the leash around four fingers. Wrap the leash around the hand once. Insert the clicker between the index finger and thumb, with the thumb on the clicker.

- b. Repeat 90° rotation (exercise 2) for one or two steps.
- c. Repeat moving exercise (3). Instruct the student to begin taking multiple steps for each click and treat.

VI. Exercise 5: Connect the Dots

- a. This is a great exercise from Karen Pryor. Set a row of soccer dots up, spaced approximately four feet apart. I usually start with five or six dots per student.
- b. At each dot, the student should “stop, click, and drop.” At this step, some students may need TAGpoints once again to reaffirm home base locations for both the treat and clicker hands, as well as reminders to keep their treat hand “glued to the seam” for delivery.
- c. Once the student is able to go down the row of dots and back successfully on a loose leash, begin randomly removing a dot each time, so that the dog has to work a little harder for each click and treat.

Homework: Practice loose leash walking in your home, back yard, front yard, and in low-distraction environments.

Week Two: Next Steps

I. Discussion/Handout: Visual markers, distractions

Discuss at-home progress and answer any questions since last week. Instruct student on how to find visual “dots” in her own environment for exercises like “Connect the Dots” – depending on the environment, these could include trees, fence posts, sidewalk sections, mailboxes, or driveways. Provide a handout listing various techniques for dealing with loose leash walking distractions.

II. Exercise 1: Warm up with 90° rotations

III. Exercise 2: Review “Connect the Dots”

IV. Exercise 3: Introduce low-level distractions, only increasing distraction level when the dogs are successful.

- a. Sound distractions – vacuum, dremel tool, squeaky sounds, music, doorbell sound, etc.
- b. Moving distractions – remote control car, skateboard, person walking with stroller, people playing catch, kids hula hooping...be creative!
- c. Food distractions – very low value food distractions, placed well off the path at this point. We use dried beans, which are boring to most dogs.

V. Exercise 4: Pace changes

- a. Set up “Connect the Dots” course again, this time varying the length between the dots – anywhere from three feet to eight or 10 feet, if the dogs are doing well.
- b. Instruct student to practice pace changes, alternating between fast, slow, and normal paces.
- c. Instruct student to practice “skipping” between dots.

VI. Exercise 5: Let’s Go!

- a. Instruct the student to walk forward two steps with her dog and stop, rotate 180° (encouraging the dog to follow a hand target around, if necessary), click, and toss a few treats two to four feet in front of their dog, running forward with the dog to retrieve the tossed treats.
- b. Repeat until the dog is readily turning with the owner as the owner begins turning her body.
- c. Begin adding a verbal cue. Instruct the student to walk forward, and as she is turning say “Let’s Go!” Complete the 180° rotation, click, toss and chase treats with dog.
- d. Practice “Let’s Go” turning at 90°, 180°, and 270°.

Homework: Find visual markers in the home training environment. Start practicing in slightly more distracting environments, using the techniques illustrated in the handout and in demonstration at class.

Week Three: Intermediate Loose Leash Walking

I. Discussion/Handout: Review progress and answer any questions regarding the previous week’s exercises. Discuss and demonstrate “Be a Tree” technique for combating opposition reflex (taking the human element out of the equation), extinction, and extinction bursts.

II. Exercise 1: Review “Connect the Dots” with pace changes

III. Exercise 2: “Distraction 8’s.” In a six-student class, I will use 12 distractions. Distractions may be other people in various positions or doing various activities, toys, a dog settling on a mat, a remote control car, a mirror on the ground, sticks from outside, etc. I set up six lanes, with two items in each lane, spaced some distance apart (usually about 10 or 12 feet, longer if the dog needs more space or is having difficulty focusing). Student is instructed to practice walking figure 8’s around the distraction in her lane, using the “techniques for dealing with distractions” detailed in the last class.

Each team rotates through the lanes and has the opportunity to work in each of the six distraction lanes on the “distraction 8’s” activity.

IV. Exercise 3: Review “Let’s Go!”

V. Exercise 4: Greeting people politely on leash. The dog/handler team is instructed to click and treat their dog for walking on a loose leash as they approach an instructor/volunteer. The instructor/volunteer is watching the dog’s front feet the entire time.

If the front feet leave the ground during the approach, the volunteer will turn their back on the dog and move a few feet away, allowing the owner to regain her dog’s focus before resuming the exercise.

When the dog/handler team is able to approach successfully, the volunteer will click for any of three acceptable greeting behaviors: sit, down, or “four on the floor,” and will reward the dog with food treats on the ➤



The students stand at opposite (diagonal) corners of a rectangle approximately. Students should stand facing each other with their dogs on their left side. Students move forward toward each other when cued by instructor, clicking and treating their dog for walking with them.



As students progress through the exercise, the width of the rectangle is reduced gradually. Once the students are able to pass within arm's reach of each other, the instructor may have them begin brief introductions (quick "hello" and handshake), reinforcing their dog for maintaining position at heel.

ground while giving him scratches. Repeat, allowing all dog/handler teams to greet each volunteer.

If the dogs are able, begin having them greet groups of people/volunteers as well.

VI. Exercise 5: Greeting Another Dog/Handler Team

- Pair students into teams. The students stand at opposite (diagonal) corners of a rectangle approximately 40 feet long and 15 feet wide (in our classroom). Students should stand facing each other with their dogs on their left side. Students move forward toward each other when cued by instructor, clicking and treating their dogs for walking with them.
- Inform the students that they will probably need to increase their rate of reinforcement as they approach the spot where their paths will intersect and immediately after passing each other.
- As students progress through the exercise, the width of the rectangle is reduced gradually. Once the students are able to pass within arm's reach of each other, the instructor may have them begin brief introductions (quick "hello" and handshake), reinforcing their dog for maintaining position at heel.
- Gradually reduce the use of food rewards once the handlers are successful at this level.

Homework: Find friends and family to help practice greeting a person politely on leash. Practice "distraction 8's" at home, in the back yard, and on walks, aiming for four new distractions each day.

Week Four: Graduation!

I. Discussion/Homework: Review last week's exercises, answering any relevant questions. Give the students "next step" suggestions for taking their training to the next level, suggesting intermediate level classes like "On the Town"

classes, Rally Obedience or another mini-course, like recall!

II. Warm Weather Plan for Week Four: Real world training. Meet in a pre-determined location outside and review "Connect the Dots," "Let's Go," greeting people politely on leash, and greeting other dog/handler teams politely.

III. Upstate NY Rainy/Snowy/Hailstorm Plan for Week Four: Practice the exercises from weeks one to three off-leash!

Certainly there is no shortage of fun loose leash walking exercises and this course could be expanded to six weeks by adding more off leash work, additional "real world" sessions, concepts like "300 pecks" for building distance and duration, introducing new and more intense distractions, transferring these exercises so that the dog is able to perform reliably on both the right and left side of the body, group walks, parallel walking, etc.

Any of these exercises can be incorporated within a basic "clicker manners" class, into day training offerings, or can function as a syllabus framework for your own loose leash walking "mini-courses." Be forewarned – this may very well turn out to be your most popular class yet! Until next time, happy clicking!

Casey Lomonaco is a graduate with distinction from the Karen Pryor Academy for Animal Training and Behavior and owner of Rewarding Behaviors Dog Training in Binghamton, NY. Casey offers a wide variety of group and private training solutions for pet owners, and also provides educational materials and workshops for community groups and fellow pet professionals to promote happy and safe relationships between dogs and their people. For more information on Casey and Rewarding Behaviors Dog Training, visit www.rewardingbehaviors.com.