

The Calm Walk Starter Guide

7 reward-based steps to stop the barking and lunging on the leash — built on the science of how dogs actually learn.

1. Understand the loop, not the 'bad behaviour'

Lunging and barking on leash are not disobedience — they are a stress response. The dog sees a trigger, the nervous system fires before any thinking happens, and the outburst is the result. You are not training a stubborn dog; you are changing how a frightened or over-aroused dog feels about the thing in front of it. That reframe changes everything you do next.

2. Find the threshold distance

Every dog has a distance at which it can notice a trigger but still take food, still hear you, still think. That is 'under threshold'. Walk at quiet times, watch for the first ear-flick or head-turn toward a trigger, and note how far away it was. Your whole programme happens at or beyond that distance — never inside it.

3. Mark the moment of noticing

The instant your dog looks at a trigger while still calm, say a clear marker word ('yes') and feed a small, high-value treat. You are not distracting the dog — you are pairing the sight of the trigger with something good, so the trigger starts to predict food instead of threat. This is counterconditioning, and it is the engine of lasting change.

4. Build the engage–disengage pattern

Over many calm reps the dog learns the loop: see the trigger, look back at you for the treat. Reward that voluntary check-in heavily. The dog is now making a choice — orient, then disengage — instead of exploding. You are rewarding the behaviour you actually want, on the dog's own initiative.

5. Respect trigger stacking and recovery

Stress is cumulative. Two hard encounters back-to-back leave a dog with no buffer left for a third. After any over-threshold moment, give space and a calm sniff-walk so the body can come down. A dog that has 'gone over' cannot learn until it has recovered — pushing on only rehearses the panic.

6. Use equipment that helps, never that hurts

A well-fitted Y-front harness and a fixed-length lead give you control without adding pain or fear. Aversive tools — prong, choke, shock — suppress the outburst while raising the very stress that drives it. The research below is unambiguous on this point; do not trade a quiet walk today for a more anxious dog tomorrow.

7. Generalise slowly, then relapse-proof

Skills are context-specific at first. Re-teach the pattern on new streets, with new triggers, at new times of day, always starting a little easier than you think you need to. Keep a few reps in your normal walks forever — maintenance is cheaper than rehab, and it keeps the calm walk calm.

Why reward-based — and why we never use pain or fear

This is not a style preference. Across independent peer-reviewed studies, aversive tools (prong, choke, shock) produce more stress-related behaviour and worse welfare outcomes than reward-based training, with no advantage in effectiveness. For an already-reactive dog, adding fear adds fuel. The method above works *with* the dog's nervous system.

The research this is built on

1. Vieira de Castro, A. C., Fuchs, D., Morello, G. M., Pastur, S., de Sousa, L., & Olsson, I. A. S. (2020). Does training method matter? Evidence for the negative impact of aversive-based methods on companion dog welfare. *PLOS ONE*, 15(12), e0225023.
2. China, L., Mills, D. S., & Cooper, J. J. (2020). Efficacy of dog training with and without remote electronic collars vs. a focus on positive reinforcement. *Frontiers in Veterinary Science*, 7, 508.
3. Ziv, G. (2017). The effects of using aversive training methods in dogs — A review. *Journal of Veterinary Behavior*, 19, 50–60.

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