

MASTERING OFF-LEASH WALKING

E-BOOK



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INTRODUCTION



Are you eager for calm and relaxed walks where your dog can run off leash? In this e-book I explain to you step by step how to achieve this. Running off-leash really is like the university for dogs and not every dog is immediately good at it. Using the steps in this e-book, I'll teach you how to approach this in a smart way, so you won't have any surprises. Walking off-leash is literally letting your dog go of, and we don't want gamble doing that, hoping our dog will return to us. We want to do it with certainty and with confidence in your dog.

This e-book is based on a webinar, which I gave a while ago. Therefore, you'll notice this e-book also contains some frequently asked questions by the audience. If you still have a question that hasn't been answered, you can always email me at liz@animalsfaith.nl or send me a DM on Instagram (@lizwolting). Let's get started!

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CONTENT

1. Why do we want to let our dog off leash?
2. Is off-leash running necessary for every dog?
3. Most common problems
4. Perfect Recall problems
5. What do you need to walk off-leash?
6. How to start training off-leash?
7. Puberty Problems
8. Building up in training: On leash
9. Building up in training: Follow off-leash
10. Building up in training: Behind or Beside
11. Building up in training: Free
12. 'Come here' training
13. Pitfalls
14. Q&A
15. Final word

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A LITTLE ABOUT ME

My name is Liz and I am the founder of Animal's Faith and Animal's Faith Foundation. This is a training center and animal shelter specializing in dogs with severe behavioral problems and euthanasia counseling. I have studied veterinary medicine, agronomy and biotechnology, and I have done several studies in psychology. I especially love the latter. Veterinary medicine has always been my second love, but behavior is even more fun.

I have been working with dogs for over 20 years now. If you look at it closely, my time working with dogs is even much longer, because when I was eight years old I was already helping veterinarians and behaviorists during my weekends and vacations. That's how much I loved animals, I grew up with dogs all my life. I guess you could say animals are my life.

I am incredibly fond of self-development and that has also happened because of the dogs. Thanks to dogs, I have learned an awful lot about myself and made my whole life a lot more fun. This also made me become a coach, even for people without dogs.

LIZ

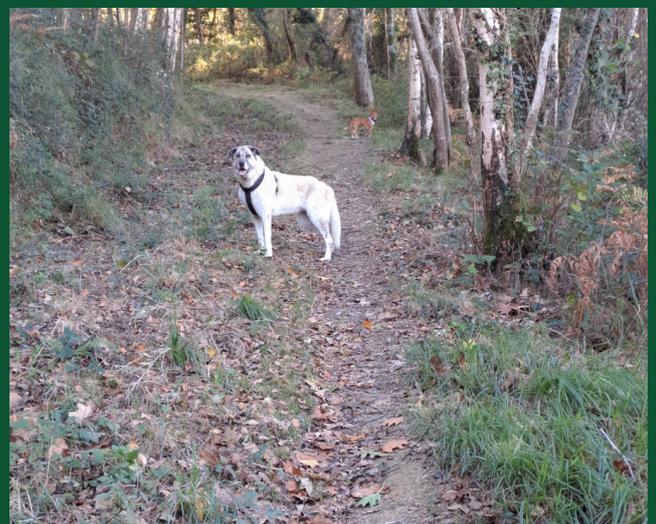
WHY DO WE WANT TO LET OUR DOG RUN OFF-LEASH?

What is it with us and dogs wanting to run off-leash? Why do so many people want that? Let's dive right into a bit of consciousness, because if we want to be self-aware, we must also be very honest with ourselves. **Many people want to let their dogs off leash simply because it is easier.** Especially with dogs that pull on the leash and are not comfortable walking on a leash, you'll often see that people quickly go to a place where they can let the dog off leash as fast as possible. Of course, this is not a good basis for walking your dog off leash. We will talk about that in detail in this book: what is a good basis? For now it is good to know: if you want to teach your dog to walk off leash, the basis must be very good.

That piece of freedom is also often a reason why we want to let dogs off the lead. **We humans think freedom is incredibly important to dogs.** I always find it intriguing to see where it comes from, because dogs do not desire freedom at all.

Instead, dogs find structure, clarity and security very important. Freedom is good up to a point and only if they can handle it. **Sometimes I think we project the freedom we ourselves desire onto our dog.** But we humans generally don't do very well on complete freedom either. That's why we have lots of law books full of rules. In fact, without those rules, we would derail tremendously.

It is not always nice to be aware of this, but it is true. I myself am a big believer in freedom in most people's eyes, but even I, traveling around with my camper, thrive very well with set rhythms, regularity and rules.



Otherwise you have to think about everything: "Can this be done? Can't this be done?" That makes life far too difficult. Rules and boundaries are incredibly important in any world, especially in the mammalian world, so that you don't constantly overload your brain.

There are also many people who say, "Yeah, but my dog has to be able to run, he has to be able to move well, therefore he has to be off leash, right?" That's debatable. A lot of dogs, most dogs, run purely functionally. Dogs actually only run when it has a function. A function may include counteracting over-stimulation. If you have a hyperactive dog that seems to want to run constantly because he has way too much adrenaline in his blood and wants to run that out, that doesn't get anywhere. The more he runs, the more adrenaline he produces and the more overexcited he becomes. In fact, it then has the opposite effect. Of course a dog needs plenty of exercise, but structured exercise is more than enough for most dogs. If you say, "I like it for my dog and for his joints if he can sometimes go a little faster than walking or trotting," then I completely understand. But then you can go running together with your dog or run alongside the bike. Then he gets the same exercise, but with more structure. So purely the exercise is not necessarily a good argument for letting your dog off-leash.

Often we also think that the dog likes it, and that can absolutely be the case, but often I encounter dogs that don't like being let off-leash at all.

What happens when a dog has to do something he doesn't like? Then he gets a lot of stress and a stress face. **What does a stress face look like in dogs?** He starts laughing very hard, gets big eyes and starts panting. He looks very happy to us, but he is not. A really happy dog is very relaxed, everything hangs a little and he actually looks sad and pathetic. This is a common mistake: we project our human emotions onto the dog. This is not always helpful, and I want to make you aware of that today.

And then there is the social pressure. I always joke that the Netherlands, if people themselves are to be believed, has 17 million dog trainers. Everyone knows best how to handle a dog, but meanwhile we are one of the countries with the most dog behavior problems. Whether we are really that good with dogs is debatable.

In the Netherlands we have 17 million dog trainers

Everyone has an opinion about your dog. Often that opinion is, "Oh well, let him run off-leash," or "Let them figure it out on their own, they'll be fine." Today I want to make you more resilient and clear: it's your dog, you know best what he needs. And if you don't know, of course I'll help you with that.

Don't let neighbors, relatives or other people drive you crazy.

They don't know you, they don't know your dog and they don't know the circumstances. So their opinion doesn't have to matter.



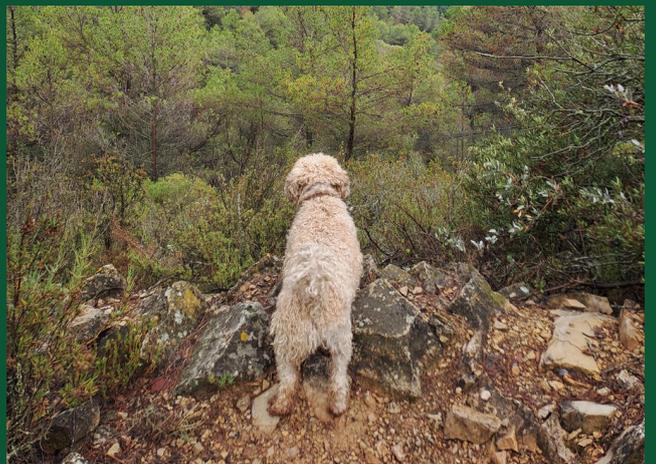
IS OFF-LEASH RUNNING NECESSARY FOR EVERY DOG?

Is it necessary for your dog to necessarily be able to run off-leash? No, it is not necessary. There are dogs that just have a hard time in this world. This may be because of their breeding, their past, their bonding or because of bred-in fears.

Sometimes you really don't do a dog any favors by running off-leash, and then it's helpful to come to terms with that.

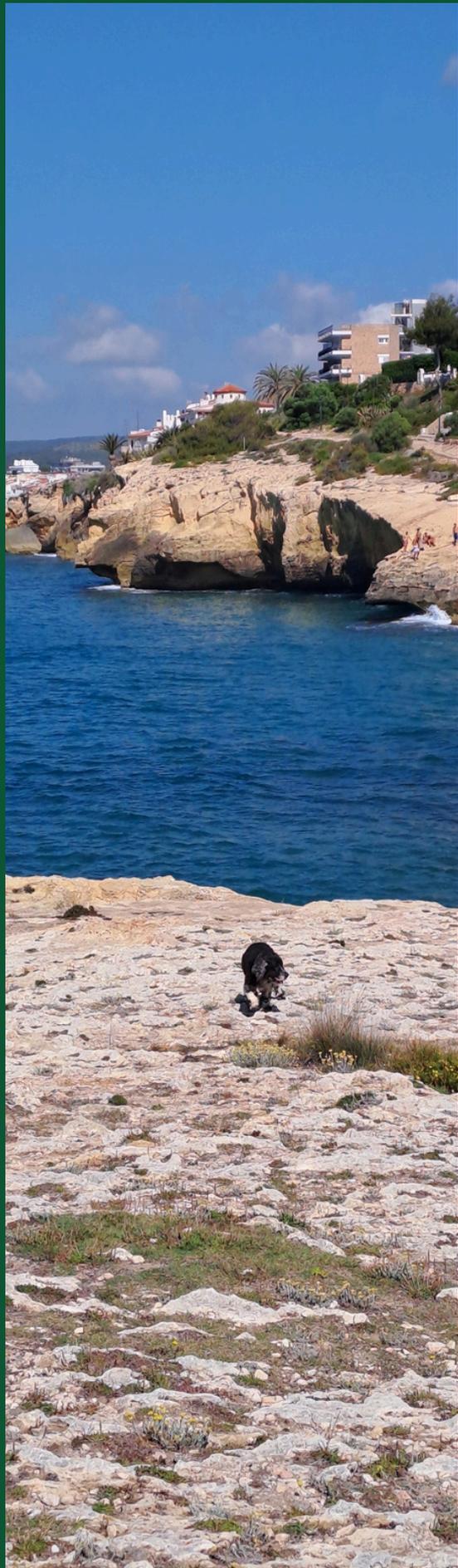
Of course, I always want to get the most out of a dog. If I see that a dog is very insecure, but also has a lot of potential to grow in self-confidence, then I think it's a beautiful endeavor to let that dog blossom. Just like with people. If I see that someone is very insecure and makes themselves small in the world, but has a lot of potential, then I will always do my best to allow that potential to blossom so that person is more comfortable in their skin and can do more in the world. If you want to see if your dog has that potential, I'm a big believer in that and you can always see how far you can get with your dog.

If you are going to teach a dog to run off-leash, of course and especially in The Netherlands it must be done in a safe way. There are many dangers lurking in the Netherlands, much more than in other countries. If you are, for example, in the Ardennes in Belgium or in the Eifel in Germany, it is already much more relaxed. There are fewer dangers there because The Netherlands has so little nature and is so densely populated. That is why it is incredibly important that your dog has an incredibly good recall. This is only possible if he has a **secure attachment** to his handler. If your dog is not securely attached, you will first have to make that attachment secure.



Your dog obviously needs social skills, too. If he cannot be social toward other animals and people, then he cannot be off leash. We have to teach him that before he can run off-leash. He has to be able to handle it mentally and physically. Running off-leash is mentally very tough for a dog, especially if he is sent in front of you. Then a lot of tasks come on his plate, and many people underestimate that. Mentally he has to be able to bear it, but also physically. For example, a dog that has osteoarthritis or poor muscle tone, you shouldn't let off leash right away. Dogs that haven't walked for years, like many shelter animals I work with, often have poor muscle tone. You shouldn't have those off-leash right away, because they will go over their own limits because of the stress. They don't feel the pain and make crazy movements, which can lead to strain. So the physical piece should not be forgotten either.

Running off-leash is mentally very tough for a dog.



MOST COMMON PROBLEMS

What are the most common problems when people have their dogs off leash without proper preparation?

Obviously the classic one: **not coming back when you recall**. We all know it: "Max, come here! Come here! I say, come here!" And Max thinks, um, what? Of course that's not the point. Of course I do find it helpful that when you call, your dog actually comes back.

There are also many **dogs that do return, but then do not allow themselves to be caught or leashed**. These are dogs that come back from a caring role, which may have to do with an insecure attachment. Often you can see this by the type of running off-leash. Such a dog walks ahead of you and scouts. After 20 feet or so, he stops, looks back and signals that the coast is clear. He waits until you connect and then walks on. This looks like a military exercise. He looks around a lot, stops and checks that everything is safe. These are dogs that are running off-leash outside with a heavy task and cannot relax.

So what do you often see? The moment you know you're going back to the car or home, and especially if the dog is running off-leash a lot in an area he knows and he knows your rituals, then five minutes before he knows you're going to arrive at the car, the dog may suddenly start putting a lot of distance between you and not coming. Or that he comes running back to you and the moment you want to grab him, he says "haha, too slow," and is gone again. Every time you call, he does come again, but makes a game of it. Every time you want to grab him, he goes away again. Or he stays put and says "grab me then, grab me if you can," and waits until you're almost to him and then he's gone again. That really means that the bonding is not healthy and then we have to go back to the basics to get that bonding right.



Of course, also the great classic: when there are distractions, **the dog doesn't listen**. So another dog comes, there are children playing with a ball, a rabbit, you name it. Especially with rabbits or deer or birds, natural hunting behavior is also a very big thing. Especially if you have a **hunting dog**, and I know there are a lot of courses and training that say you can't let a hunting dog off-leash, because that's what he was bred to do. This is one of the things I would like to refute. I totally disagree with that. I have hunting dogs myself, of course, and they also walk off-leash. So I think with that I am also indicating that it can just be done. You just have to know how.

A dog basically hunts from two motivations: one is control behavior, two is hunger. The moment your dog knows that he does not have to show control behavior, he is not going to hunt, and if your dog is not hungry, he is not going to hunt. Not being hungry is pretty easy, then you have to give him enough food. But no control behavior, of course that is something that is determined again in that bonding. That's very interesting to look at, though. But I do believe that you can teach a hunting dog not to hunt, or at least limit it.

The zoomies. A lot of people think that dogs get zoomies when they start running madly back and forth or in circles because they are so happy. Nothing is be further from the truth.

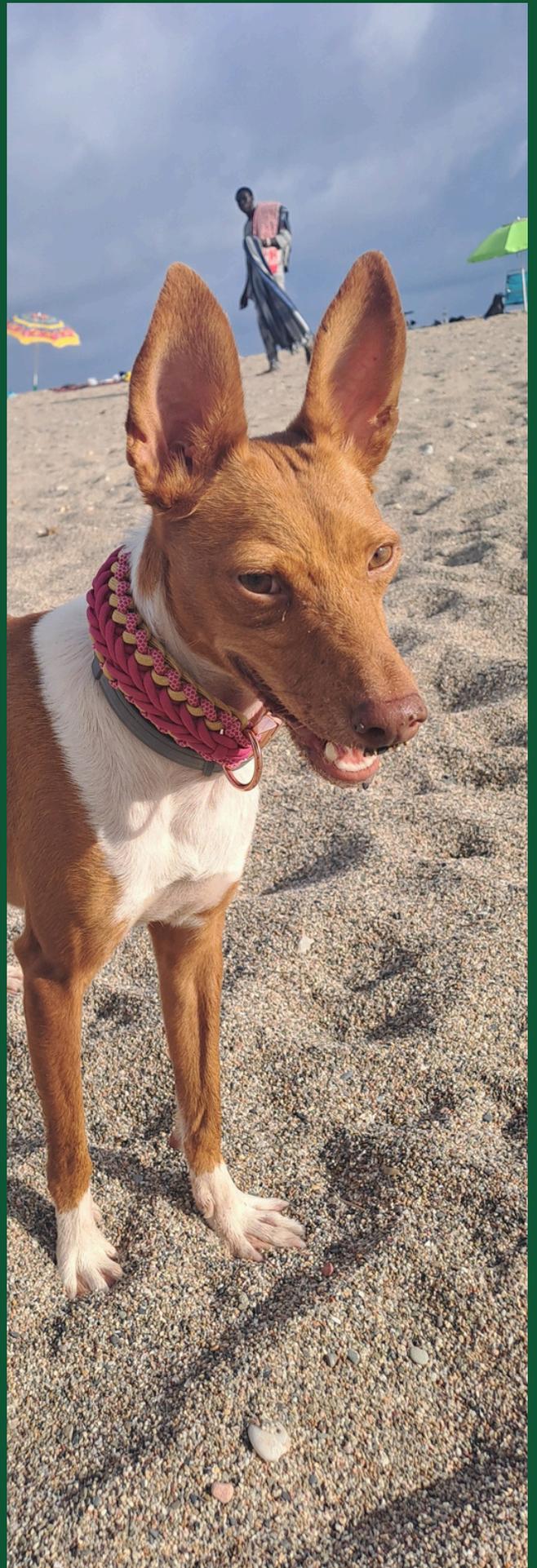
Zoomies are really a sign of severe overstimulation. That is, at that moment your dog has a mega-high spike of adrenaline in his blood, causing him to run really fast. At that moment he is also unreachable. He can't hear you when you call him. That is preferably not desirable when you let him off-leash, because if you have to have control over your dog at that moment, it is just impossible. It is also impossible for your dog to listen to you at that moment. We would rather prevent that.

Asocial behavior, of course, is not what we want. We want social behavior, not antisocial behavior. To others, that is, that he just goes up to people, jumps up to people, pushes against them, is not nice to other dogs, chases them or plays very loudly. The moment your dog does not take into account the other person's state of mind and energy, he is not being social.

Suppose you have a very happy-go-lucky dog and he meets another happy-go-lucky dog. Then it's fine if they start playing and check that out a little bit with each other. But if you have a happy-go-lucky dog and he meets a very shy, anxious dog and he interacts with that exactly the same way he interacts with the other happy-go-lucky dog, then he's already not being social. A fearful or insecure dog needs a very different approach than a happy, open dog.

Your dog knows that, but then he starts showing some bullying behavior. Bullying behavior, of course, is not social.

Sometimes you also see antisocial behavior towards the handler himself. This means that the dog jumps up to us out of stress, grabs the leash, pulls at our hands, hangs on our coats or pants, runs around you barking, but also towards other people. Especially with Border Collies or Aussies it still happens that they bite other people in the calves or something like that. Of course, these are all problems we don't want.



PERFECT RECALL PROBLEMS

I would like to talk briefly about the Perfect Recall method. In my experience, some people get stuck on this method, and I like to explain why that is. You almost have to be a miracle of God to perform this method, and that's kind of the point. So, if you've done the Perfect Recall course and are thinking, "It's not working and my dog can't do this," **don't worry, I'm going to teach you a whole other way.**

For those who do not know Perfect Recall: it is a recall dog course where you pick a recall word. This is a word you almost never use, for example, "linguini." You may use this word only when your dog has to come to you. What I have seen is that you have to train this inside first, for example when you are making food for your dog, because by then you are 100% sure he will come anyway. This is how you condition the word and build it up further and further.

You have to practice this for 10 to 15 minutes every day. That takes a lot of time and awareness, and it's super tiring.

It might happen for you to sit on the couch and your dog is laying there adorably, you put your hand out for a moment and say, "Ah, come here!" Yeah, there goes your recall word.

My biggest problem with this is that if you get startled while your dog is off-leash and something happens, like a hare or a deer crossing and your dog wants to chase after it, you'll probably yell "come here" instead of "linguini." And certainly not with the same intonation, which you should do with the recall word. The moment you panic, the whole physiology in your body changes and you cannot speak with the same intonation as when you are carefree. So that's kind of the problem. I personally could not do it.

You often see that the buildup to this method is very slow and very up and down. People are naturally impatient, and I understand that, because your dog doesn't live super long. If it takes five or eight years to teach your dog something, the question is whether you've really taught him or whether he's gotten so old in the meantime that he's naturally just started listening. And by that time, he may already have too many ailments and not be able to run off-leash.

Finally, people also sometimes use higher intonation here to make the recall word sound exactly the same to everyone. It feels strange to many people to use a crazy word in a high-pitched voice. Especially with men who naturally have a lower voice, it can feel unnatural to call their dog in a high-pitched voice. Your dog is much more likely to respond to energy than to your voice. I always think it is more important to have a good energy to what you are doing than your use of voice.



WHAT DO YOU NEED TO WALK OFF-LEASH?

So in my experience, what does it take to have your dog walk off-leash without problems?

Obviously a great sense of security. The bonding I mentioned earlier just has to be right. Your dog needs to feel safe with you, but he also needs to have enough self-confidence to make his own choices. You want to start building that confidence, but there has to be a foundation. If that foundation isn't there yet, we can't start off-leash walking yet. Of course, I am happy to help you build this foundation. We won't discuss this in this e-book, but just send me an email or DM and I'll be happy to help you.

Socialization is super important. If you always walk in the same town or do the same laps, I recommend going everywhere with your dog first and making him resilient to change before teaching him off-leash. This is because it is incredibly important that your dog can learn contextually. What does that mean? That your dog has seen enough of the world and has developed enough self-awareness so that he can compare one situation to another.

Suppose you are in a forest and training there, and you know that there is always a rabbit crossing. If you train there a hundred thousand times with that rabbit, always crossing the same path at seven o'clock, it's important that your dog can transfer that context to other situations. If you are on vacation with your dog or on a weekend trip or just feel like going to a different forest and a rabbit crosses there as well, he needs to be able to compare those situations. He must be able to make the same choice in the new situation as in the old situation. This is super important and can only happen if your dog is aware enough of the world around him. This is possible only if he has seen enough of the world.

If your dog is a bit of a homebody, it is usually because we are homebodies too. Then it's really important that you go out with your dog first and make sure he becomes resilient to change. He should not be startled at every little thing. Because if you have a dog that gets scared at everything and he's on the off-leash, he's off. No one can stand up to fear.

So, aim to **minimize your dog's fears. Building self-confidence is really nothing but overcoming fears**, both in people and in dogs. Suppose 80% of your dog is anxious, that means he might have 80 different fears. With every fear that you solve, little by little your dog becomes less anxious. And at some point he may have only 50 or 40 fears left. Eventually, he will have fewer fears than the average dog, because you have addressed all those fears. That means you have turned your fearful dog into a confident dog.

The same goes for people. I grew up with red hair, braces and glasses. That's not good for your self-confidence. So you get bullied at school and as a result you get a lot of fears: fear of being around people, fear of being seen, fear of making yourself heard, fear of walking upright, you name it. Meanwhile now, I no longer mind being seen, walking upright and making myself heard. With that, my self-confidence has grown. So growing self-confidence is really just a misnomer. It's about resolving fears. Those fears lie over your self-confidence and when you remove those fears, self-confidence remains. Go work on that nicely if you think there are some gains to be made, because you will do yourself a great favor, and your dog too.

The right age is also very important. We often see problems because people forget that their dog is also going through puberty. In many courses you hear that you should let your puppy run off-leash as soon as possible. Here again I am going nicely against this, because I absolutely disagree. Why not? Because puppies need an even greater sense of security than human babies. And running off-leash is like university.

Running off-leash is the most difficult thing your dog can learn, especially in a busy world. If you let your puppy run off-leash too soon, you are basically saying, I won't help you. That would be the same if you put your child somewhere on the street and walk a few feet away, when the child cannot walk properly yet and actually needs your hand to keep balance. That's not nice, because your child will probably fall, start crying, you name it. For puppies, walking on four legs, falling over may be less likely physically, but mentally it's incredibly hard.

Running off-leash is the most difficult thing your dog can learn, especially in a busy world.

You then see that those puppies bond very poorly with their handler. They attach in a panicky way. That's why it's important to make your puppy feel safe and supported enough before you let him run off-leash. And so then you get the basis for that unsafe bonding.

Normally, in secure attachment, you have two individuals who can coexist and experience a beautiful togetherness.

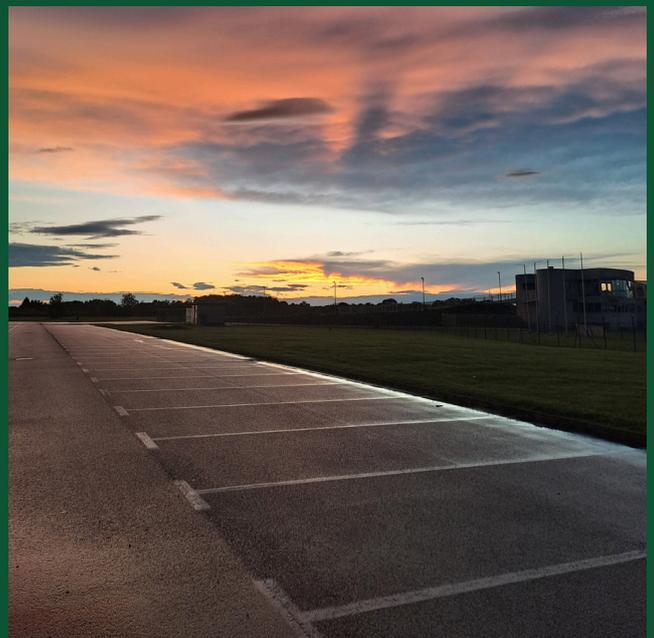
In unsafe attachment, however, the individuals are too intertwined. The dog cannot exist without the owner, and sometimes it seems like the owner cannot exist without the dog either. These days you often hear people say, "If my dog dies, I really can't handle that, I'll die too."

I understand that you love your dog very much, and I am also a big believer in loving your dogs tremendously. But I would never want to burden my dogs with my quality of life. I would never want to say, "If you die, that's going to hurt me a lot." With even if it's unconscious and not a saying, dogs still feel because they are energetic beings, that it's their fault if they die and you feel bad because of that. And that's not fair.

So, I think it's very important that puppies grow up very safe. We really need to take them by the hand, i.e. on a leash, and let them discover the world with us step by step.

This way they can feel safe with us and always be with us the moment something exciting happens. It is crucial here that we always set a good example.

Ideally, I start teaching dogs in the Netherlands, mind you, in foreign countries it's a bit different, **to walk off-leash when they are 2.5 years** old. Why 2.5 years? Because that is when the brain is ready for a slightly freer life, for more tasks and responsibilities. With dogs you can always do times 7, as most people know. So if your dog is 2.5 years old, that's comparable to a child of 18. At the time a child is 18, on average, they also leave home with their parents. Dogs in nature also leave the pack at about 2.5 years old. A dog pack normally consists of father, mother and children. In all respects, you see that is the age when dogs can stand a little more on their own two feet.



If you're going to do this too early, you're basically telling your young dog that he should be able to handle something right now that requires a much more mature brain. And that's not always fair. That's not to say that there aren't dogs you can teach earlier. There are, of course, and it also depends on where you live. For those who follow me, when I found Ivy, she was about a year and a few months old. Within six months of having her, I turned her off-leash and trained with her. She was then about a year and nine months old, estimated, because she was naturally found. Ivy is a hunting dog, but a dog with very few behavioral problems. At that time I was living in my camper van in Spain. In Spain, of course, there are much less stimuli, which is very different from Holland. When I went to Holland with her for the first time, I didn't let her off-leash, because life in Holland is so different that you can't compare. It is very different if you live in the inner city or if you only have a few small parks with 600 other dogs in them for off-leash running, than when you live, for example, on the Veluwe and there is still peace and quiet and space. Or if you live just on the border with Belgium or Germany and you can go just across the border to big nature parks.

Then it is also very important to know that during puberty the dog's brain grows unevenly.

During the dog's puberty, which lasts from about 1 to 3 to 3.5 years old, the same thing happens as in humans. The left brain grows a little, then the right brain grows a little. These do not grow equally. What happens then is that the connections between the left and right hemispheres are temporarily broken. You then see that your dog suddenly seems to forget things he has learned. He could do certain things in certain circumstances and suddenly he does stupid things there.

This is because that link is no longer there. That neural pathway in the brain is disrupted. Maybe you remember your own adolescence, when you probably did some stupid things too. If someone asked you why you did them, your answer was probably, "Yeah, I don't know either." And that's right, you really didn't know, because because of the disruption of the brain, you couldn't know either. That's not a bad thing, and that doesn't mean that there aren't opportunities for your dog at puberty to already get a taste of running off-leash.

Maybe you remember your own adolescence, when you probably did some stupid things too.

But you can't expect that to go completely flawlessly and that he will be able to do that completely after six months. You also have to take into account that the adolescent brain is a little different every day and that you really have to be able to feel what your dog can and cannot handle at that moment. It can very well be that one day he can handle a lot and the next day just nothing. You have to take that into account.

That brings us right to training frequency. What a lot of people do, and this is really an easy trap to fall into, is that they start practicing with their dog off-leash for the first time. They click the dog off-leash and it goes well. Almost always the first time goes heartily well. Then they think, "Yes, we're here!" And from then on, the dog goes off-leash every day. That goes well for 3-4 days and then it gets worse and worse. After 2 weeks of letting go every day, your dog won't come back.

This is because a dog has a fixed habituation pattern, just like humans: 4 days, 14 days, 28 days.

If you set the training frequency every day and you let your dog off-leash every day without proper guidance, he's going to panic a little more every day. He is going to associate more stress every day with being off-leash and lose connection with you. In fact, a stressed dog and a stressed person cannot bond.

The moment you are stressed, you close yourself off, make yourself hard on the world, and cannot connect with the other person until your stress subsides.

So that training frequency is very important. I would rather start with one day of practice, three days not. Then one day of practice, three days not. Then one day of practice, two days not. And then one day of practice again, two days not. **Every time you feel your dog getting a little out of connection, you know you're overcharging him.**

In addition, with training frequency, we are also talking about training length. The idea is not to say, "Okay, we're going to release the dog now," click off-leash, and then run off-leash for an hour. Running off-leash is really something you have to teach. It's fine to start with 30 seconds. If you can do 30 seconds well, you can see if a minute works as well. And if that goes well, you can try if 2 minutes works. For many dogs, the limit is already at 2 minutes. If that goes, you gradually build up a little bit at a time. So it is very important that you don't go from 0 to 100 in that.



The most important thing, and perhaps the most difficult thing for people, **is to maintain the emotional connection between you and your dog**. Especially if your dog is already advanced and he is allowed to run off-leash, which in my case means he is allowed to walk in front of me. It is important to have some kind of invisible bubble around you. You have a personal zone and around that another zone. In that zone you have feelers out to the world and sense what is going on around you. My dogs know not to go out of that bubble. If a dog wants to go too far, I say, "Hey, not out of the bubble."

I keep communicating in my mind with my dogs. This may sound a little floaty, but what I mean is that **I stay mentally in touch with my dogs**. This is super helpful, especially since, for example, my dog Sam is profoundly deaf. If I need to call Sam, I can yell "come here" until I weigh an ounce, but he doesn't hear it. However, if I yell "come here" in my head, he immediately turns around. That's because of that feeling connection, because everything in this life runs on energy. If you learn how to control that energy, you can stay in touch with your dog, even if he's a ways away.



The moment you are stressed, you close yourself off, make yourself hard on the world, and cannot connect with the other until your stress subsides.

HOW TO START RUNNING OFF-LEASH?

If your dog cannot walk well on a leash, he should not be off leash.

It sounds simple, but it is difficult, especially with reactive dogs. If your dog is reactive, you should not think about off-leash walking at all yet. Many people say, "My dog is very reactive on leash, but off leash he doesn't do anything." That's right, he doesn't try to chase the other dog away like on leash. Because the moment he is off leash, his fear is much greater. And the moment your dog is afraid, he may exhibit a fight, flight or freeze response.

When he's on a leash, he can't run away. He can't run away, he can't, because he's on a leash, so he doesn't get very far. The **freeze** some dogs try, they go down by their legs. But then we humans often start tugging at them, you name it, so we make that impossible. I'm not in favor of keeping the freeze in, per se. But we also often don't do that very skillfully with pulling and tugging, making it even more exciting and very uncomfortable for the dog. So what does he end up choosing because that's what he's most successful at? That is **fight**. And with fight he wants to say, I'm going to chase that other dog away.

Well, and he achieves success with that a hundred thousand times, because if your dog strikes out, and especially if you have a little bit of an imposing dog, what happens? Well, those people were planning to walk on anyway, so they were already leaving, that dog or those people, or whatever he's lunging at. But your dog doesn't know that. And we're going to avoid those situations, people are going to avoid us, so your dog is just thinking, "Oh wow, if I don't want to run into other dogs, for example, then I have to lunge, because they'll all go away." And that's exactly what he wants.

The moment he is off-leash, he can run away. And that keeps him safe. **A dog is a conflict-avoiding animal.** So the last thing a dog wants is to create conflict with other individuals. And so when he is off-leash, he can run away. That often goes well for a while, sometimes even a couple of years, until your dog gets such a compromised sense of security anyway, because it gets worse and worse and worse every time he gets into that situation, that he still starts fighting with other dogs on the off-leash as well.

So the moment your dog is reactive on the leash, we have to solve that first, and when that is solved, then after that we can teach him to walk off-leash.

So, if your dog can walk totally relaxed on a leash, it is important that he does that nicely, **walking beside you with a little bow in the leash** each time. Because if you are going to prepare him for off-leash walking, he should not be leash pressure dependent. There are a lot of dogs that always seek the pressure of the leash, because they have often been taught from an early age that that pressure of the leash is incredibly important and that they have to seek it in order to have control over the situation. That in turn is related to insecure attachment. At the moment that we of course have a dog that puts continuous pressure on the leash and we would then once let go of the leash or click off-leash, yes then suddenly your dog has lost all that pressure and then he panics at once, because he is not used to that. So then he will run off or jump around you. So the most important thing is that your dog doesn't experience any pressure on the leash when he walks around with the leash. So he really needs to be able to walk nicely beside you with an arc in the leash. He should be able to do that when you go past dogs, when you go past cats, when you go past horses, bicyclists, cars, scooters, you name it.

So that's the most important thing. If he can't do that yet, then we're going to practice that first.

Then next, **we are going to teach off-leash tracking**. I'll go into a little more detail on this in a moment. After that, if he can do the off-leash following, then you are going to teach the behind or beside command. I think I am the only behaviorist in the Netherlands, or the world perhaps, who works with the behind or side command. But I think it's the most genius command ever. So I hope you will all copy that from me, because I think that will bring a lot. And only when you get that right, then you start teaching him the free.

Of course, it is very important that you build up your training correctly and that you do not practice every day. In addition, it is very important that you keep your own energy, self-confidence and self-reflection up to par and that you do not start panicking the moment you let your dog go. Positive thinking is always important and of course keeping that bond with your dog.

If you are going to prepare him for off-leash walking, he should not be leash pressure dependent

PUBERTY PROBLEMS

7

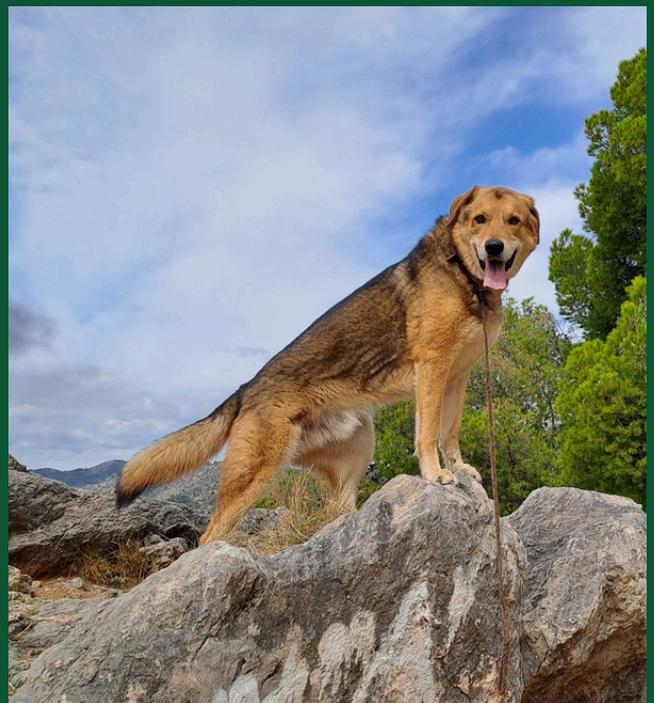
We just talked a little bit about the adolescent issues. The growth of the brain is really something you have to take into account a lot, as well as developing a mind of your own.

Especially if you have a self-aware and intelligent dog. Then I'm not talking about dogs that can follow commands very well, because those are often, sorry to say, slightly less intelligent dogs. I mean dogs that can think for themselves. So when you say "sit," that the dog thinks for a moment first and then sits. I love that kind of dog. I deal better with dogs that are a little bit like me and don't just do what someone says, but check first to see if there is logic in it. Those are often mountain dogs, akitas, and other old-fashioned type dogs. These dogs can think well and have their own opinions. At puberty, that own opinion develops, and that's good. We want to direct that, not inhibit it.

It is also true that **new fears and insecurities may arise** during puberty. This is not a bad thing; we can guide them in this. But it is important to take this into account. In addition, the ego also plays a role. The ego of dogs also develops, and just like in humans, it can sometimes get in the way if they have no control over it.

This can cause them to do stupid things, especially males are more likely to suffer from this. But bitches, especially those from abroad, can also have a big ego and try to push their opinions. So keep in mind that you can have setbacks while training with an adolescent dog.

That's not a bad thing, but factor it in, because the more you factor it in, the less it's going to be a disappointment for you. This is not to say that your dog has forgotten, forever. Once that brain has grown back together, that it's the same size again, that brain half, that neural pathway will just be put back in place. So it's still there, only your dog can't access it for a while. So it's a temporary thing.



If your dog is not neutered, you may also have **problems with hormones** during puberty, which can create additional challenges. I'm not saying that every dog should be neutered, but I am an advocate of making a dog so confident that he no longer needs his testosterone. With bitches, I'm a little easier because spaying has many health benefits.

And of course, I have a shelter and I work in a shelter. I see how many dogs there are in this world, way too many. So I also want zero risk of oops litters. If your dog is running off-leash, an accident is in a small corner. You don't always have control over other people's dogs. If someone has a bitch in heat that breaks out and runs off-leash, that can create dangerous situations or unwanted puppies.

During puberty, your dog can sometimes bond very unevenly with you. People with adolescent children may know this: one day they are very sweet, the next day they can hate you. That's part of it, and not a bad thing. But so does your dog. He's going to turn against you sometimes and then bond very much. That goes back and forth a little bit. You have to take that into account, too. Accept that it comes with it, then you can switch quickly and have the least problems. Stress always comes from resistance.

When you start resisting natural processes, you get stress. Going along with certain processes and showing understanding produces much more.

During puberty, your dog can sometimes bond very unevenly with you.

BUILDING UP IN TRAINING: ON THE LEASH

What are we going to do when we want to teach off-leash walking? First, on the leash, we are going to make sure that the dog can always follow relaxed under all circumstances. That means that your dog will go no further ahead of you than his shoulders at your knee, with a wide arc in the leash. **Next, you will learn to verbally direct your dog.**

Most people steer by leash, and that's fine for a basic, provided you steer properly and don't pull or push. But later when your dog is off-leash, you won't have that leash. That's why we want to teach your dog to respond well to verbal steering as well. This is also good for yourself, to learn to keep your arms low, not to put tension on the leash and not to reach for the leash too quickly. This is how you learn to verbally indicate to your dog what is and is not the intention.

Then it is important to practice the "come here. Without a good recall, we won't get very far. You just start this on a short leash of 1.5 to 2 meters.

Have your dog sit or stand and call him to you. You can also do this with two people, with the dog coming and going between you. Variety is important. Practice in different places and make the leash longer and longer: from a short leash to a 5-meter leash and eventually a 10-meter leash. By the time your dog listens well at 10 meters, you can just leave the leash on the ground. Practice in different places such as paths in the park, the garden, in the house, and in the woods. Industrial estates are also great for practicing on weekends, because then they are quiet and you have an asphalt environment. This way your dog learns contextually.



It is also important to practice tempo changes and turns. Walk faster, run a bit, walk very slowly, suddenly turn right or left. Your dog should follow without pressure on the leash. This helps to strengthen the connection between you. Keeping a halt is also important, because it lets you know how much your dog is engaged with you. If you stop and your dog walks a few more steps, he is not as engaged with you. A dog who is properly engaged with you will stop immediately when you stop. The more stimuli and areas you practice, the more resilient your dog becomes. And that resilience is incredibly important.

If you stop and your dog walks a few more steps, he is not as engaged with you.



9. BUILDING UP IN TRAINING: OFF-LEASH TRACKING

If you think, "I've totally mastered this. I only have that line attached to one finger now, there's a big bow in it, and I don't really need that line at all anymore," then that's great! **Then we can move on to off-leash following.** Free following means that you leave the leash on, but let it fall to the ground. Use a light leash, preferably not one with heavy muskets dragging on the ground, but just a light leash. And you don't announce it. You just drop the line.

Why don't we want to announce it or dwell on it? Because then we make it a thing. And anything you make a thing of becomes exciting to dogs. When we say, "I'm going to release you and you have to follow," your dog thinks, "Okay, something is going to happen. I don't know what, but it sounds difficult." So you just drop the leash when your dog is tracking well, and in an appropriate place. Start on easy trails, such as narrow paths that are bounded on both sides. For example, along canals where you have water on one side and a slope or fence on the other.

When you drop the leash, exhale. Many people unconsciously hold their breath and your dog hears that, making him think something is exciting and may want to run. Consciously exhaling helps to stay calm.

Also pay attention to your thoughts. Don't think in advance, "Oh, should I let go of the leash now? But what if someone comes later?" If your head starts grinding, just say, "Stop, don't do it." There's no point in having a hundred thousand doomsday thoughts. That won't make you better, neither will your dog, and it makes your life much more difficult. Some people think, "If I assume the worst, things can only turn out better." That's really nonsense. If you assume the worst, your body experiences the stress as if the worst has already happened. That is so taxing on your body that when the worst really happens, you can't handle it properly because your body is already exhausted from the stress.

Go into it with an open mind. You can't predict the future. Trust your gut. If it feels right, let go of the leash and don't think about it too much.

The more open the environment and the more stimuli, the more difficult of course. **Start on low stimulus trails that are enclosed.** And keep it short. If you find it exciting, let go of the leash, count to three and pick up the leash again. Then you've done it for three seconds anyway.

Well, now I'm also going to say something again that you don't often hear and that people might start to think something about. **Don't practice in off-leash areas.** Why not? Because often dogs come there that can't run off-leash properly. Especially in fenced off-leash areas, people come with a dog that doesn't listen and needs a fence to catch it again. So there are many dogs there that set a bad example for your dog. Dogs learn faster from other dogs than from people. If your dog often interacts with dogs that show bad behavior, he will adopt it. Just like with children. If your child deals a lot with children who do not show good behavior, your child will copy that behavior. Rather, practice somewhere outside where it is quiet. Check in your community to see if your dog is allowed to run off-leash outside built-up areas, and find safe places.

What do you do when your dog starts sniffing? With me, if my dog is in the "Follow," he is allowed to sniff as long as we keep walking at the same pace. I don't mind if he dives on the ground for a moment or whatever, as long as we keep walking at the same pace. If he stands still to sniff, I say, "Hey, come with me for a second." The same goes for off-leash tracking. If my dog sniffs and stays still, I also stay still. If I continue walking while he is stationary, I break the follow and teach him that he is allowed to do the same. That's not the point. In off-leash follow you do the same exercises as in the previous section: turn around, tempo changes, etc.

Dogs learn faster from other dogs than from people. If your dog often interacts with dogs that show bad behavior, he will adopt it.

STRUCTURE IN TRAINING: BEHIND OR BESIDE

Well, this is my favorite command ever. So, the moment you can get a dog to follow super well off-leash, you can give him more freedom. This is actually the first step to real off-leash running. This actually already falls under off-leash running, but in a safer way. So, what is the command Behind or Next? **With me, it simply means that your dog may walk behind me or beside me.** But you can call it whatever you want, like pancake or forest fruit juice, as long as it's clear to your dog.

What does Behind or Side mean? It means that you are in off-leash tracking, I say Behind or Side, and the moment my dog stays to sniff, I walk on. Behind or Side means that your dog gets to stay in the area that you have already explored together and which you have confirmed together is safe. There your dog is allowed to do his thing: run, jump, all directions, up to my knee. The new area I have to check out first to see if it is safe, because who knows, maybe there is a bear in the bushes.

This command gives your dog a lot of freedom, while you still maintain a lot of control. And it works great. Of course, with any command you teach your dog, such as Follow, Free, Behind or Beside, it is important that you always use the leash in the beginning. You want to be able to quickly guide and help your dog if needed. When your dog has nothing on, that becomes a thousand times more difficult than when you can just grab the leash and still redirect.

How do you teach this? Your dog is going to sniff at some point. You allow that, you just keep walking. Then when he thinks, here I come, and he wants to pass you, practice on narrow paths first. Grab the leash or put your foot in front of it and say "Behind" or "Next to. Repeat this several times.

Of course, you don't do this every day all the time. Alternate between walking on leash, following off-leash, and Behind or Next. That way your dog will learn the distinction between the different commands. Later, if you can leave your dog very free a lot, this command is also great when you want to cross intersections, for example. If you have no overview and you call "come here" and he comes, you can, for example, say Behind or Beside or Follow. That way you have all the time you need to look at the intersection and cross safely.

For some dogs, this is the highest you can go, and that's totally fine, because this is already a lot of freedom for your dog. Some dogs get so stressed from leading, you shouldn't want it for your dog. If your dog can already do this, he already has a lot of freedom, can move and do his thing. It is also a super safe way of running off-leash because you have overview.

Some dogs get so stressed from leading, you shouldn't want it for your dog.

Be careful when you do the exercises that you don't do the turning exercises. Because if you turn while your dog walks behind you, you put him in front of you, and that is not the intention. You can do the tempo changes, but don't turn for a while, because that will put your dog in the wrong place.



BUILD-UP IN TRAINING: FREE

Is your dog already hearty at the Behind or Next command? Then you can start practicing the Free command. This means that your dog is allowed to go forward and explore unknown territory first. Your dog will then encounter possible threats first. Be careful with this and build it up gradually, as it is super exciting for your dog.

Start with this in a familiar area, where you have an overview and your dog already feels safe. If he doesn't feel safe yet or the area is unfamiliar, your dog will think, "Oh my god, I don't know." You yourself also don't know what can happen. For example, in Croatia there may be dangerous dogs behind a fence or running off-leash. You can only send your dog ahead if you know he can handle it. If he can't handle that, you shouldn't.

Be sure not to give the Free command with quick, short, harsh commands. Don't say "YES!" in a loud tone, because then your dog will suddenly start running very fast and hard. That's exactly what we don't want. We want him to maintain a calm state of mind and stay relaxed. As soon as you see him getting stressed or hyperactive, take him to you and let him follow on a leash.

Then he needs your help again for a while.

Also, make sure your dog doesn't go further than 20 feet away from you. If he goes farther, you actually already know he is getting out of connection and then there is not much you can do. Always give the Free command gently and quietly. With me, the command is a quiet word "Free. That means they don't have to go forward right away, but if they go forward, that's okay. I then don't limit that anymore. Practice the "Come Here" regularly because it is very important. A big pitfall is that people only call their dogs when something is going on. Then you get dogs who at "Come here" think, "Oh wait, what's going on?" and are too preoccupied with their surroundings. Make it a game and vary it. For example, put 10 paces and call "Come here." The next time put 23 paces and call "Come here." Then 12 steps again and then 37 steps again. Apply variety. Make sure you don't just yell "Come here" when there is something. That really applies to the rest of your dog's life

TRAINING "COME HERE

As you hear, with me the "Come here" is just "Come here. It is important, and this is where I agree with Perfect Recall training, that you keep the same pitch in the beginning. Dogs don't understand Dutch, but they are good at remembering intonations and energy. My "Come here" always sounds the same. And with everyone I teach it to, it's the same 'Come here' too!

Because I want my dogs to come immediately when I call "Come here," I choose an intonation that is naturally easy for me and sounds open. If someone yelled at me "COME HERE," I wouldn't come either. So you want to use a friendly, open tone, as you would when you like someone and ask, "Hey, come here." Use that same friendly tone for your dog as well.

If your dog knows the "Come Here" well, you can add variation later. I find that very important. When there is stress, I can also sometimes call out panicked, "Come here! Oh my god, come here now!" Then I want my dogs to respond to that intonation, too.

That's why I turn that into an exercise. I pretend to be stressed and gradually build my "Come here!" into a stressed version. This is a safety buffer that I build in so that my dogs also respond to a stressed "Come here.

What about those lines? You start with a short leash for the "Come here," if that goes well, with a long leash. Then you keep the leash on, but you don't hold it. The dog always reacts differently when he feels there is a leash on him. This gives you more control and motivates him to come to you faster. When running off-leash, the weight of the leash ensures that your dog does not immediately run off like a spear.

For example, anyone who knows Ivy, my little Podenco, knows that she is incredibly fast. If I hang a long leash on her, she suddenly walks quietly beside me and doesn't run. So with many dogs, a long leash causes a slowdown. That can be very helpful when a dog has yet to learn this. You start with a short leash, then with a long leash, then with a long leash without holding, and only then do you click the leash off.

Practice the "Come Here" in all kinds of places, but make it easy on yourself. Start on narrow paths that are enclosed, then move to wider paths, such as bridleways or wide streets. Then move to open plains. Beach, for example, is very difficult for dogs because dogs are shade animals. The more open it is, the faster they feel threatened and the faster they become hyperactive. Only when you can handle open plains, start adding stimuli. Start on narrow trails with no stimuli, then move to wide trails with no stimuli. **Then gradually add stimuli:** first little, then a little more, and finally a lot of stimuli.

And then it is very important that the moment you have your dog in the free, for example, and you see that he is very busy sniffing somewhere, you instinctively know that he will not come if you call him. Then don't call, because that will only teach your dog not to respond to the recall. So that is not helpful. If you know for sure that your dog will not come, don't call. Especially if he is sniffing somewhere, just wait until his mind is with you again. It's also just a dog, he may also be lost in thought from time to time. That is not a bad thing. Just be patient and when his mind is with you again, you can still call him. Success is more important here, especially in teaching, than pushing your way or stroking your own ego to see if your dog will listen in an impossible situation.

Then, be on time with adjusting.

Make sure you adjust your dog in time. If you feel he is in danger of disconnecting, don't wait too long. Our heads often want to think, "maybe this time it will go well," but better safe than sorry. If you suspect and your gut tells you he is about to step out of connection, adjust already.

Pay attention to the state of mind and not the actions.

Many people adjust based on actions, but it is better to pay attention to the state of mind. A dog changes his thoughts and state of mind first before he deploys the corresponding actions. Imagine, your dog sees a rabbit and thinks "hey, a rabbit, shall I go after it?". That is the moment when we need to adjust. We don't want to wait until he thinks "yeah, that's a good idea, I'll go after it" because then we'll be too late.

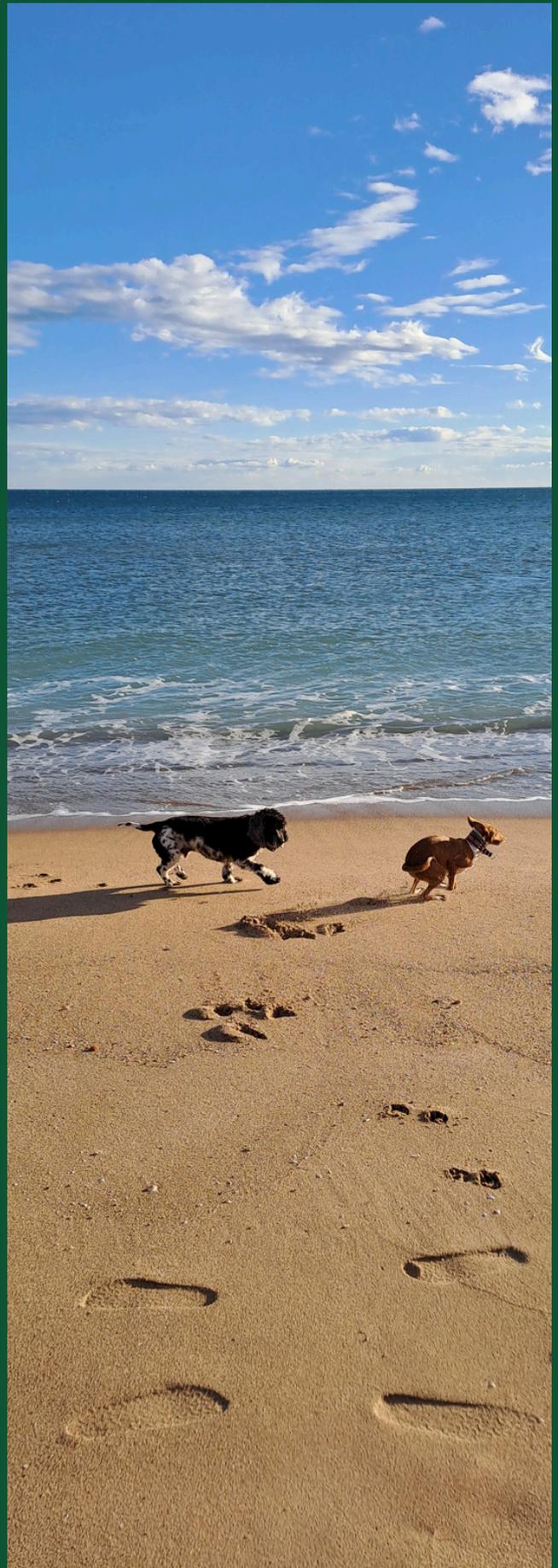
Pay attention to the state of mind and not the actions.

What helps a lot is to stand still the moment you say "come here.

You can teach it later as you walk on, but most dogs are lazy creatures, which is why they are successful in life. When your dog walks in front of you and you say "come here," what do most dogs do? They stop for a moment, look and think "what is he saying?". If you keep walking, the dog thinks "if I keep standing here, he will come to me". That's how you get a bit of a lazy dog.

I don't mind if your dog asks you to stand still and you walk up to him, but then use 'stay' or 'wait'. Don't give the 'come here' command, because then you'll mix up the commands and your dog will think, "yes hello, I'll do what I feel like because you don't know anyway." So be consistent, especially while teaching. Of course, the better the bond is with your dog and the more attuned you are and have practiced together, the less precise you have to be. But in the beginning, consistency is really important.

Be consistent. If not: your dog will think, "yes hello, I'll do what I feel like because you don't know anyway.



PITFALLS

First, wanting to go too fast. We already talked about that. We often get excited, and I hope I certainly get you excited with this e-book, but it's important not to immediately think, "Okay, now we're going to practice all week, every day on every walk." That's just too much. Your dog will get overexcited, get sleep deprived, and then things won't go well at all.

You can see anyway that running off-leash asks a lot of dogs and that they can become more restless in the house as a result. So it is important to give your dog extra guidance indoors, extra sleep and extra rest. This way he can properly process everything you are teaching him. Without sleep he cannot process what you are teaching him, so there is no point in exercising without adequate rest.

It is, of course, important to be in touch with your own feelings. If you find that difficult, indicate it, and it can always be resolved with coaching. It is essential that you can distinguish between what your head is saying and what your feelings are saying. This can be difficult, especially in today's world, but it is crucial if you want to be good with dogs. There's no getting away from that. So if you find that this is a challenge, you need to work on it.

Self-confidence is also very important. If we lack self-confidence, we can't trust the dog, and we don't trust ourselves in those situations. Then everything becomes a big difficulty, because we start to doom. What you often see is that people become very busy when they are insecure. They give contradictory signals, "Quiet huh, no, no, oh yes good, so good, no quiet, no, then I may take a no, I think," and then it becomes a worked up mess. The dog then thinks, I'd rather run away, because it's a little bit exciting. So your own calmness is the most important thing.

If we lack self-confidence, we can't trust the dog, and we don't trust ourselves in those situations.

Then it is important to emphasize that not being socialized enough can be a big problem. We also talked about the adolescent brain, which is another important factor.

Another pitfall is falling **out of touch with your dog yourself.** In our busy world, this happens often. For example, when your dog is nice and off-leash, you grab the phone to answer an email or make a phone call. This causes you to lose focus on your dog. Prevent this by leaving your phone at home or putting it on silent. Make sure you stay in touch with your dog while learning, because if you don't stay in touch, neither will your dog. Inattention leads to mistakes, and we want to avoid that.

Finally, of course, it is important to practice the "come here" often enough so that your dog understands that "come here" does not mean something exciting is going to happen.



QUESTIONS FROM THE WEBINAR



I have a question about rewarding. With the different steps, how do you look at rewarding? And my second question is, if you practice off-leash walking once in as many days, do they have to be on leash the other days or are they still allowed to continue their complete uncontrolled off-leash walking?

No, I would stop the uncontrolled unleashing altogether. If you do more uncontrolled than controlled unleashing, it never becomes controlled. And I always reward the "Come here" with food, but the rest, like the off-leash following and the Behind or Next, I reward mostly energetically. Energetic rewards are often more powerful for dogs than food and provide bonding.



I have a short question about free walking. With just walking on leash, you also practice free, but on leash, where the dog is already walking in front of you. Do you have to stop doing that for a while? Because that just seems confusing to me.

No, with me Free also means that the dog may walk forward. I think you are making it a little too complicated. The principle remains the same. When building up off-leash walking you first practice calm following on leash, then you work on behind and alongside, and only when that goes well do you give the dog more freedom to walk in front of you for a while. This applies both on leash and off leash.

You can also give the commands behind or alongside on the leash, just as you can give the commands follow and free. Free means that the dog is allowed to sniff, pee, poop and walk around a bit, both on leash and off. So there is really no confusion, the principle remains the same.



Yes, I notice some confusion about the commands "behind" and "beside." Do you just say "behind" or "beside" on the spot? Or do you choose one of the two words? My command for "behind" means "walk behind my back." So when I say that, the dog walks behind me.

I understand that can be confusing. If your command "behind" means "walk behind me," and "beside" means "follow," that's fine. The important thing is to be consistent with your commands. So when you say "behind," it should always mean the same thing to your dog. The same goes for "beside." Feel free to choose the word that works best for you, as long as your dog understands what you mean. If you want, you can also use a completely different word, such as "pancake." The important thing is that the command is clear to your dog.



How are you going to start teaching the command "Behind"?

If you want your dog to learn to walk behind your back at the command "behind," it is best to start this on narrow trails. You always start with the leash and send your dog with the leash behind your back. When the dog is in the right place, you start teaching the command by repetition. For example, say, "Good, behind," "Yes good, that's behind," "Behind, good," "Behind." Repeat this word often so the dog will associate it with that position.

If you need to redirect the dog, in the beginning you can just do it with the leash. For example, if the dog wants to go to the right, you send him quietly behind your back to the left. It is important to give the command only when the dog performs the correct action. Many people make the mistake of giving the command when the dog does something wrong. For example, when the dog moves forward, they say "follow" while the dog is already walking half a meter in front of them. The dog then associates the command with the wrong action.

So, if you want to teach the command "behind," say "behind" only at the moment your dog actually walks behind you. After some time, you can start testing whether the dog understands by keeping the leash relaxed and giving the command "behind." You can possibly still use a hand movement to help your dog remember what "behind" means. If the dog starts walking behind your back by itself without leash guidance, then you know he understands the command.



Hi, one of the things that I am very concerned about is that my dog does indeed seem to have a hunting instinct. She walks well on a leash, neatly and with a nice off-leash leash, and that generally goes very well. Only my big fear is that if I release her and she sees a rabbit, squirrel, or whatever, she will run off. What is the ideal way to slowly do something about this? What is my proper reaction when it happens, right now still on a leash, because I really don't dare let her off-leash either. What do I do best here?

I would definitely start practicing with a long leash first. That way she can make the mistake and get the start, but you can stay calm because you know she can't follow through. This allows you to train yourself on adequately adjusting the moment she wants to make the mistake and also pay attention to your timing so that you get her out of that frame of mind in time. That's the most important thing. That's where I would start.

You want to control that state of mind, not the actions. The moment she's already chasing that rabbit or that squirrel, then we're a little too late. So we have to steer a little earlier. It's about getting a good bond, but also just practicing part of it.



You talked about that feeling connection, that in your mind you are trying to communicate with your dog. Can anybody do that? Is that something you can practice?

Yes, anyone can do it, but it is important to know that the fewer layers you have on yourself, the easier it is. We humans are all kind of the same at the core, just like all mammals. Only through life we all layer over our core. The more layers you have, the less well you get to your core. And only the cores can communicate with each other. So if you want to communicate with your dog, you have to peel those layers off of yourself.

In a healthy dog, it often helps to hold that hand under the belly the first few times until they get that feeling a little bit. Once they get the feeling, it becomes more and more of a habit.

FINAL WORD



You have come to the end of this e-book. Hopefully you've learned a lot about learning to walk your dog off-leash. If you need additional help with your specific challenges, send me a DM on Instagram (@lizwolting) or an email to liz@animalsfaith.nl. I'll be happy to help you further.

More readings and e-books are available on my website lizwolting.com. I also regularly organize new courses and tracks. Be sure to take a look if you are interested! I wish you the best of luck!

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LIZ