

Where to Put Your Choker

Dr. Roger A. Mugford

The choke chain has come to be regarded as an indispensable aid to training dogs, but even the most time-hallowed practices deserve an occasional critical review. The author has recently completed an investigation into the uses and abuses of choke chains, and failed to find any benefit from using a choker rather than a conventional leather collar. Indeed, there are some very considerable dangers and disadvantages associated with the device. These charges may sound like heresy to many dog-trainers, but to others, it may strike a sympathetic chord.

Canine Body Language

In nature, the wolf does not adorn itself with a collar, so we must presume that the body postures and sensitivities of the dog have evolved without collars in mind. Wolves and dogs communicate by the position and hair cover on the body and tail, by facial expressions and chemical signals. They are not particularly vocal; thus their response to complex voice commands from human beings does not come easily or naturally. One can conclude therefore, that the traditions of spoken commands and tugs at the neck of a dog do not exploit the natural response tendencies of the species.

Leash Pulling

There are some very good reasons why a dog should not be allowed to walk in front of its owner: it is an expression of leadership or dominance over the owner, the dog is exposed to potential danger and the owner could get very tired arms. In practice, very many owners fail to train their dog not to pull on the leash, despite making conscientious efforts to do so. Why should this be so? Perhaps it is because the objectives of training have been wrongly stated or are misunderstood by the dog owners.

In idealistic terms, the behavioral objective of leash-training is to teach the dog that proximity to the body or the legs of the owner is rewarding and being out in front of the owner is unrewarding. The objective should most certainly not be for the dog to learn an association between a vocal command 'HEEL' and a painful sensation to the neck, but of course that is the approach most commonly taken by many dog trainers. There is an important distinction between the two.

In practice, the proximity-training approach to stop leash pulling proceeds as follows:

- a. Use a leash which is sufficiently long for the dog to pass its hindquarters beyond the feet of its owner.
- b. Use a broad collar which physically stops movement of the dog forward, but without causing undue pain.
- c. Command 'HEEL' while braking the dog with its collar and moving alongside and in front of the dog.
- d. Reward it with praise, food or other positive reinforcement when the dog has been passed by the owner.

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The initial element of this training sequence is reward for proximity to the owner, and that is much more effective than delivering pain out in front. As is well known, pain disrupts attention and further learning.

Choker vs. Collar

There are two or possibly three components to the stimulus delivered by the choke chain: first, the clicking noise as it tightens, then tactile sensations to the skin and finally constriction of the musculature, blood vessels and other organs in the neck. The full sequence of checking a dog with a choker takes a finite time: perhaps $\frac{1}{3}$ - $\frac{1}{2}$ second, and it is a compound stimulus of noise and pain, on a sensitive part of the dog's body.

An 'old-fashioned' leather collar delivers a quite different sensation to the dog: There is an instantaneous connection between tightening lead and neck, and loading is spread over a wider surface area of skin. Thus, there should be little pain and local damage to underlying tissue. The leather collar's great advantage over the choker is that it delivers a punctate stimulus to which one can condition the 'HEEL' sequence. Secondary advantages are that it does not toughen or desensitize the skin to tactile stimuli, it does not deliver disruptive pain, and of course the owner can hang a name tag on the dog.

Do Chokers Cause Injury to Dogs?

This is an issue which is currently provoking considerable concern among some veterinarians. The list of injuries caused to dogs by heavy-handed control with choke chains does not make pleasant reading. The following have either been encountered by the author or reported to him by veterinary surgeons:

- a. Neuromuscular disorders resulting from constriction of the cervical region of the spine.
- b. Ruptured trachea.
- c. Bruising to the ear and ear capsule, causing undue touch sensitivity in this region.
- d. Epileptic fits, triggered by constriction of the blood supply to the brain.

These are not isolated cases, and given the pressures generated by giving a check to a choke chain on a heavy dog, such damage is to be expected. Readers are invited to put one high up on their arm and get someone to give it a yank. Better still, try it on the neck, and remember that a dog's neck carries virtually the same organs and delicate tissues as the human neck. Similar design principles to the choker have been exploited for centuries in the animal trapper's snare. Most dog owners find the above comparison distasteful, particularly if they have seen a wild animal strangled in a snare.

Do Chokers Work?

Clients are referred to the author by veterinarians because their dogs exhibit various behavioral disturbances and problems. Before seeking professional advice, the majority of his clients have attended dog-training classes where they were instructed to fit a choker. Yet about 50% of the clients' dogs still pull on the leash, with or without a choker.

So the reality of using a choker often does not match the expectations which dog owners acquire from dog trainers. It is simply not good enough to say that such owners are hopeless or incompetent, or that there are right and wrong ways to use chokers. The best way to capture the interest and enthusiasm of ordinary pet owners in dog training is to devise techniques which are pleasant to operate and which work in practice.

There is no doubt that one can train a dog that is wearing a choke chain; it is simply that they are cruel and unnecessary. And since one design of choker is little better than another (they all choke!) the best place to put your choker is in the waste basket!