



Understanding Different Collar Designs and Their Proper Uses

By Steve DiTullio

Over the years, I have heard a lot of debate over what types of collars and tools are best when used for training dogs. It can be a rather controversial topic in some circles of dog owners and trainers. In my experience, there is not ONE collar, tool or technique that works on ALL dogs and their problems. To further complicate the debate, I have found that many people do not understand some types of collars and how they work - or the proper use and the principals of their design. It is very important to use the right tools and collars with a particular dog breed, temperament or personality and their individual desires and intents. Another factor is the owner or the handler's ability and skill level. Owners that are patient, have a good demeanor and body language when working with a dog, and that owner's desire to learn and improve their skills on how to manipulate their particular dog to better manners and behaviors, are more successful. Spending quality time on training and making obedience part of your pet's life creates a willing follower in the dog. Research in reading materials and seeking a reputable trainer and behaviorist are good outlets to help a dog owner that has questions about behaviors and training.

When introducing and using new stimuli (collars, tools or techniques), I recommend the use of whatever positive motivators the particular dog responds to (food, toys, tugs, praise and games) and the intonation of your voice. To help the introductions, have a positive association.

Flat Collars are great to start with for most dogs, especially with puppies and toy breeds. I prefer a wide leather or nylon, with a metal buckle over the plastic snap connector. With toy or small breeds, the plastic snap connector is usually fine to use, but with dogs that are a little larger and more formidable, they can possibly pop open or break the plastic snap-type connectors.

Slip Collars are constructed of nylon rope, rolled and stitched leather, or most commonly a piece of chain. They have a ring on each end, one side of the chain

Different Collars and Their Proper Uses

is slipped through one ring that creates what is called the "dead ring," the chain is then pulled through until you have a loop. The other ring is now called the "live ring." This is where the leash bolt attaches and makes the collar open and close.

Slip collars, also called choke collars or choke chains, are good choices for some dogs (these collars only harm a dog when they are improperly fitted and used). There are mechanics to them that all people are not aware of. They are designed to close and release quickly and smoothly. As stated, they are not always the best choice for some dogs, due to the thin design of some chains that can possibly effect or damage some dog's necks when used improperly.

For the slip collar to function correctly, it should be approximately 3 to 4 inches larger than the dog's neck, or for a dog with a large-proportioned head, it should just slip right over the head. When walking or working the dog with a slip collar on your left side, the collar should be shaped like a "P" when you are looking at it and slipped over the dog's head while the dog is facing you. To handle the dog from your right side, it should be shaped like a small "q" or "9." This allows the collar to work smoothly with a quick snap and release action with the leash. If the collar is not used like the above explanation or description, it will not release and put constant and unnecessary pressure on the dog's neck, not allowing you to administer a proper correction.

Choke collars are useful on dogs that have a negative or defensive reaction to the prong collar. The choke collar can help keep this type of dog calmer when correcting unwanted behaviors and in training sessions.

In my experience, a dog must have a full understanding of a command's meaning through foundation training before any corrections are used. When corrections are being first introduced, gentle guiding corrections should be used to help determine the level of compulsion a particular dog may need to adhere to, and follow a command from the owner or the handler. On dogs, their neck is a primal area of their body and with most dogs, their neck is pretty strong and resilient. Some dogs do have a strong ability mentally and physically to deal with adverse stimulations like corrections, referred to as hard dogs.

Prong Collars are sometimes referred to as pinch collars or spike collars. They are made up of a series of inter-locking links that have an almost spike-like-look that are attached to a chain with rings where the leash bolt attaches to the collar.

The collar has a medieval look to it, in some people's opinion, but when introduced and used properly, it can be a very effective training tool. Like any piece of training equipment, the links should be checked for wear and tear and replaced when necessary. Proper fitting is important. The collar should be sized so it's a snug fit on the dog's neck by adding or removing links. This collar is opened and closed by the interlocking links when put on and taken off; it is not slipped over the dog's head.

How does it Work? The chain where the leash bolt attaches actuates the opening and closing motion of the collar. It applies an even pressure around the dog's neck to simulate a natural or primal bite correction and sensation that is displayed in pack hierarchies.

When is it a Problem? Some dogs are too sensitive to this type of collar's action and can get over-stimulated or frightened. In a defensive dog, a correction with the prong can possibly escalate the dog's level of aggression.

I have worked with dogs that, when this type of collar was put on, the dog's demeanor changed immediately without a correction due to the dog's natural or primal sensation of the feeling that the collar's design represents. There are also plastic caps that can be used to cover the prongs for over-sensitivity to the skin of shorthaired dogs or a dog's temperament.

Whenever using a prong collar, I suggest to back it up with a slip collar on the dog, also, and attaching the live ring to the prong collar ring to the leash bolt. I have witnessed prong collars' links opening up due to improper fitting or wear. If this ever happens, the slip collar works as a safety.

Gentle Leaders or Head Collars are a newer type of tool that are becoming popular. There is no real correction like that of the pop and release technique used with the other collars discussed. This collar is designed to steer the dog's head and body. As a friend of mine says, "where the head goes, the body will follow."

Similar to the way a horse's head halter works, the gentle leader loops around the dog's neck and snout and the leash bolt attaches under the dog's chin. Proper fitting is a must and they usually come with detailed instructions (I wish all collars did). It might not be the best tool for brachycephalic type dogs (English bulldogs, pugs, etc.). I have noticed, also, that this type of collar is sometimes a little trickier for some dogs to accept and wear due to the loop that goes around the snout.

Different Collars and Their Proper Uses

Some dogs try to paw at it or rub it to get it off. So, again, I stress taking your time with a careful and positive introduction. It's the key to helping a dog wear the collar. Don't force it, take your time, or you and the dog could be on the way to frustration. Some people mistake it for a muzzle, which it is not. The dog can open his mouth fully when the gentle leader is fitted properly. Although I have noticed on some dogs, including my own, that it can even subdue an aggressive thought or action.

Final Thoughts: The timing and technique required for the proper use of the collars, especially the pop and release, is difficult for some dog owners to learn. There are some handlers that do not possess the physical ability to execute this. Also, there are others that are not willing to give the process the time, patience and effort necessary or don't understand what's needed to help a stubborn or willful type dog. They can struggle with pure positive-motivational training and may possibly need to use some compulsion-based techniques at times in their training programs.

I am an advocate of all different types of training methods. Foundation of learning should start with positive-motivational methods, to help make learning new commands and positions fun and interesting for a dog to willingly follow. A dog needs to have a full understanding of a command before directional corrections are implemented. Compulsion should always be used thoughtfully and gauged according to the dog's temperament and willingness to follow commands, if it is going to be used (resourcefulness and versatility in training programs gives the owner, handler or trainer more ability to change unwanted behaviors and teach positive behaviors).

I always have an open ear and mind to other methods, techniques, experiences and outlooks on training and behavior mods. All dogs are unique and respond to stimuli differently than others, so there needs to be room to learn new things when working with dogs.

Always consult with a reputable trainer or behaviorist to help implement a training or behavior modification program that's right for your particular dog. ■

Steve DiTullio grew up in a family of animal lovers, especially dogs. He always had dogs in his family. They were great pets but never trained well. Due to their misunderstanding of what it actually takes to fulfill a dog's needs, he became involved in training 20 years ago. He began to get a real understanding of what a dog needs (Structure, Guidance and Alliance). His goal is to help both human and animal to understand each other. Steve is a certified Professional in Dog Obedience Training & Behavior Modification. Visit him online: www.forpawzdogtraining.com



Dropping the chain through the Dead Ring to create a loop.



Putting The "P" shaped chain loop over the dog's head from left side walking.



Introducing the Gentle Leader nose loop with positive technique using a treat.



Gentle Leader proper fitment- Notice how it's shaped like a Y on the dog's neck and nose.



The nose loop should be adjusted so it reaches just near the end of the dog's nose.



Connecting the Gentle Leader ring to slip collar live ring.



Hooking links to open & close a prong collar.



Putting the prong collar on the upper part of the dog's neck.



Connecting the prong & slip collars together with the leash bolt.

