

Pinch Collars... Ask a Trainer

By Nan Arthur, CDBC, CPDT, KPACTP

Dear Trainer,

I have a dog that pulls like a manic when I try to walk him. I have never taken him to any classes, but a friend of mine that took her dog to class is insisting that I try a pinch collar. They look awful and painful, but her dog does walk nicely on leash. What do you think about these?

Signed,

Pulled in two directions

Dear Pulled,

I look at the use of equipment and training methods in two different ways, morally, and from a scientific point of view.

From a moral point of view

I have worked with thousands of dogs over the years, in homes, group classes, in rescue settings and in shelters. With years of experience using all types of training methods during my learning process, I have concluded that the only logical way to build a good relationship with a dog is to construct one based on trust, and punitive devices and/or punitive training does not foster trust.

There are people that will argue to the death that pinch collars don't hurt the dog and that they only "remind" the dog to pay attention. That is just not true. They are designed to dig into the dog's neck and pinch—that's how they work. Training is communication to a dog, and if people resort to pinch collars and other punitive methods, they are not very good communicators.

Also, consider trainers that work with wild animals. These animals have little or no relationship with humans like those we share with dogs, and yet, they are able to get lions, tigers and bears, (oh, my) to do amazing things, such as all the husbandry skills needed to care for them—and using all positive methods. So, if zoo trainers can get a 200 pound cheetah to present his tail for a blood draw using only food and a clicker, it goes without saying that we should be able to train our dogs to do just about anything, since they have been domesticated to humans.

From a scientific point of view

Pinch collars are negative reinforcement at its finest, which means they hurt, and to stop the pain the dog has to stop pulling. And, yes, they can and do work on some dogs, but I have also seen dogs with calluses on their necks from pinch collars, and in every state of stress when wearing a pinch collar. This not just a physical issue, but a psychological one as well.

Training requires that the learner increases or decreases the behavior, so if pinch collars really worked to teach a dog to walk at someone's side, then the dog should be able to

walk on a loose leash without the collar after using it a couple of times, and this is not the case.

There is also the chemical process that dogs go through when stressed, and that has to be considered when training a dog. Pain causes a course of chemicals in the body. The use of a pinch collar causes repeated stress and more chemicals, and that barrage of hormones actually makes the dog more sensitive to the environment and less tolerant. Things that might be, “No big deal,” normally, might become highlighted and stressful for a dog that is worried about a correction that causes pain.

The use of harsh training equipment can also lead to such things as fear and aggression. This can happen when a dog is “popped, pinched or shocked” in the presence of another dog, or people. These “corrections” are often done when a dog is showing normal responses to excitement, stress or fear, but are misread by their handler, and the dog is then corrected for misbehaving. Many dogs quickly make the association that every time he sees things such as other dogs or kids on skateboards, it equals pain, so other dogs or kids on skateboards must not be safe and the reactive behaviors often increase.

What are you teaching your dog?

Pinch collars, choke chains and other punitive methods of training are designed to punish unwanted behaviors but don't teach the dog the correct behavior, and in many cases will actually “shut down” the dog. These punishers can frighten and eventually dampen a dog's personality with the dread that they might make a mistake and be corrected. It's no wonder that most people report that when they take the choke chains or pinch collars off, the dog no longer responds.

The very names of the different devices say it all—choke chains, pinch collars, and electronic shock collars: They were designed to punish and cause pain and have no place in modern, stress-free training.

Loose leash walking is not the “litmus test” of a well-trained dog; loose leash walking without punitive devices is what sets that standard. It displays good communications between dog and handler and exemplifies a relationship built on trust. That is not to say that dogs that are still learning to walk on a loose leash, or are working through fear or reactive behaviors don't have a good relationship with their handler, it is the “do no harm” ideal that helps that team to arrive there sooner, and with trust intact once they get there.

In conclusion, it is far better to work with a positive reinforcement trainer, either privately or in a group setting if you think your dog would be able to focus on you with other dogs around, and teach your dog how to walk on a loose leash without the pinch collar.

Good luck, Nan Arthur, CDBC, CPDT, KPACTP

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