

# Choosing a Training Collar for your Dog

By Diane Jarvis

Shopping for your new dog is fun these days. Fashionable collars of every fabric and design can be found, including those for holidays and special interests. But how do you choose an effective collar when it is time to train your new best friend?

We have all seen people being dragged down the street by their 60 pound puppy, with the dog hacking and coughing as it chokes itself. Many people, in fact, think it is pretty normal until the dog “learns better.”

No doubt about it, a well-trained dog is a happy dog. Training is necessary for both dogs and guardians to ensure a positive, loving relationship that lasts a lifetime. Shelters are full of dogs surrendered due to behavioral problems. Philosophies and methods of training vary from trainer to trainer, so it is a good idea to meet with potential trainers to find one with whom you are comfortable. One important consideration is the type of collar (training tool) used and recommended by the trainer.

Choices range from the basic leather “buckle” collar to a head halter, choke chain, or prong collar. There are pros and cons to each that should be considered, along with your choice of training method. Something to think about is you and your dog’s personalities and his life experience so far. This is especially important if adopting an older dog that may have had negative interactions with people and discipline.

For puppies, a simple nylon, cloth or leather buckle collar will suffice. Be sure to have an ID tag on the dog at all times. Check to see that the collar is not too tight or too loose by slipping two fingers under the collar when buckling.

At about four to five months you may begin basic obedience training. Here in Flagstaff there are puppy kindergarten classes for dogs as young as eight weeks. However, if you decide to do this on your own please consider the following:

Many trainers recommend the use of choke chains or prong collars, while others are adamantly opposed. Any training tool can be dangerous if used incorrectly; technique is everything. Remember that a heavy-handed approach can be counter-productive. If a dog is fearful or stressed it will only learn to fear you and may impair learning. Although the choke chain has been a popular training aid, in recent years some trainers and veterinarians have associated choke chains to injuries of the dogs’ vertebrae, trachea, and esophagus when used incorrectly.

Many injuries may occur before dogs ever begin training classes, or before the guardians have proper guidance. And remember, if it is used as a training tool, a choke chain should only be used on a dog when supervised. Because the chain is loose it can catch on something and strangle the dog.

Prong collars look a little tortuous but have been used successfully, especially with large dogs that pull excessively. They are self-restricting and can only get so tight to prevent strangling.

The prongs are bent so that they don't dig into a dog's neck and have been compared to the way a mother dog uses her teeth on a puppy's neck for correction. Some veterinarians have seen injuries (broken skin, tracheal damage) related to improper use so use them with care. As with the choke chain, it works by producing a degree of discomfort that the dog will associate with unwanted behavior.

A more recent addition to the pet industry is the head halter. More popular brands are the Halti, the Gentle Leader, and the Promise Collar. It is used by trainers and pet guardians that object to harsh physical corrections such as leash yanking, jerking or hitting. The halter works on large and small dogs alike by redirecting the dog's focus sideways or down and simulates the way a dog pack leader will grasp a subordinate's muzzle in his mouth. It works with your dog's instinct to tell him that you are the leader, and can even have a calming effect on nervous or fearful dogs. The principle is that if you control the head, the body will follow.

Regardless of the method and tools used, pet guardians are strongly encouraged to obedience train their dogs. Be sure to be consistent in your training and gain your dog's respect as leader. Through effective and disciplined training, the bond between you and your dog will deepen and create a lifelong friendship.