



Prong Collars

It's not uncommon to see idiots using prong collars on dogs with no regard to the dog's confusion or discomfort. This is quickly noticed by the way the collar is worn on the dog and the way the handler uses the collar for corrections, or worse yet- walking the dog (generally at the end of a taut leash). Prongs, or pinch collars as they are also referred to are one of the most misused tools in dog training, and when I see people using them incorrectly, I'd like to slip the collar onto the person and do to them exactly what they are doing to the dog.

To start with, the average person misunderstands the concept of "the prong collar is *power steering* for dogs". The fact that it makes handling the dog easier (and when properly used, more fair to the dog) happens only if and when the dog understands what is asked of him. We do this by introducing the collar to the dog before we begin *using* it. Whether it's a remote collar, a prong or any other tool, we want to desensitize the dog to the item *before* we need to use it. In order to do that I generally have the dog wear the collar several days before I start using it. There is a great concept of leash pressure that entails teaching your dog to follow the pressure of the leash in order to release the pressure. In other words if you pull the dog towards you gently using the prong, you keep slow and steady pressure, instead of yanking, and when the dog gives in (and comes toward you), he gets a treat. This teaches the dog that he has a way out of the *correction*, and that way is to comply.

My technique in using a prong collar starts with placing it on the dog's neck and rewarding him with treats and plenty of praise, then removing the collar and repeating this step a few times. I want the dog to know that the collar has nothing to do with anything. In fact, as with all tools we use for corrections, we want the dog to see them as neutral items before we use them. If the dog feels the collar go on and then he gets yanked, he will quickly learn that they collar is the thing giving him the correction. If he's neutral to the collar he will see the correction coming from us. All corrections should be given as a verbal direction first. The dog should understand this direction, and if he fails to comply we use the collar as a tool to redirect him.

Once the dog is wearing the collar, I play with him, walk him and then begin using a leash on the prong. My goal is to get the dog to understand that if he goes with my direction, he will never get a correction. Just a slight tug on the prong generally will bring a dog into compliance and I feel this method much more fair than head harnesses, body contraptions or a dog pulling unnecessarily on a flat collar.

For those that see prong collars as items of torture, I can assume that they have never seen dogs in any state of drive, and given up on those dogs that I start my day with. Using a head harness is a much crueler method of yanking a dog around (by his head). A fair correction / redirection on a prong collar is much more fair to a dog that requires a correction. There is no training tool that is unfair, only the way it used.... And that is up to the person at the other end of the leash.

Some important aspects to consider:

Placement of the collar: The first mistake people make with prong collars is that they don't place them onto the dog's neck properly. The collar should sit high-up on the neck, just beneath the ears. The collar should be snug enough so that it remains there when the dog moves, runs or shakes his head. It should not slip down the neck and ride above the shoulders. If there is movement in the collar it can cause injury to the dog.

Using the prong collar for aggressive dogs: Another common mistake people make is using the prong collar for aggressive dogs without first understanding the drive of their dog. If your dog has a high level of drive or redirects aggression and you are using a prong collar on your dog to "curb" his aggression, there is a high probability that your dog may bite you when you yank on the leash. He may also further his aggression toward the other dog or human. Before using a prong collar for aggression you should see what type of drive your dog has, and if he has even a slight amount of redirection, I would strongly suggest not using the prong collar. Furthermore, if your dog transfers your correction onto the other dog, he may end up being more aggressive than when you started. The dog needs to understand clearly that the correction is coming from you and he should be very clear why he's being corrected.

A big part of training a dog is a solid relationship between you and your dog – before you start training. Your dog should want to please you because he loves you or he respects you, hopefully both. If you're just gonna yank him around to get him to comply, good luck. A positive based approach is easier, safer, more thorough and much more fair to your dog.

The way that I use a prong collar is on a loose leash with another collar backing up the prong. So I have a snap that clips onto the prong collar and then onto a "backup" choke chain or rope. I've had prongs come undone and if I'm dealing with a dog that has some issues, I don't want that to happen. I also use a strong 4-6' leather leash that will withstand my correction and the dog's mouth if he comes into contact with it.

If you've taken the time to teach your dog how to avoid the pressure of the collar, your walk or correction should only be necessary for a quick moment. If a dog is pulling against the collar constantly, he is not benefitting from the collar, and neither are you. The collar is used for corrections, that means the dog should understand what he is doing wrong and then understand what it is you want of him. If he pulls on the leash and your goal is to correct this, he must be corrected *before* he reaches the end of the leash. He must also be rewarded when he is in compliance. For example, the dog starts out next to me and begins to lunge forward. Before he reaches the end of the line (and starts pulling), I say HEEL, or EASY (whatever word you choose) and then if he doesn't comply, I say NO and give the leash a sharp **pop** backwards as he

reaches the end of it. When he turns to look at me, I praise and say YES or GOOD... whatever your reward word is. The correction should be quick, firm and unemotional. We don't yell at the dog, we correct the dog in a fair physical manner and we don't correct him when we say the command. The **correction** comes on the **NO**. Once the dog is in compliance, we reward and make certain that the dog is clear that he is now doing what we asked for. If he begins to lunge forward again, we repeat this step. This system works on any size dog, but it is important that the dog is treated fairly and humanely. The correction should be abrupt and some dogs will yelp when corrected. This is not a bad thing; it is most often only a startle response from the dog. If the dog lies down and cowers, the correction is way too strong and/or the dog is very soft. It is important to gauge the correction at the dog's level.

The pressure it takes to correct a dog properly on a prong is much easier on the dog than most other collars since we use the correction as a way to get the dog to comply. The dog is immediately able to turn off the correction by getting into line. If the dog is pushing at the end of the leash he is creating tension that he will never figure out how to turn off. The more he pushes, the more it hurts. The dog must understand how to turn off the pressure.

Please read my article on The Binary Dog it will give you a clear understanding of my concept of fair direction in dog training.

There are no quick fixes in dog training. If you want to be fair to your dog, you need to teach him what is expected of him and then test it with distractions. It is during the proofing and correcting phase that we can use corrections – not during the learning phase.

Dogs that lunge at other dogs while on a leash can be corrected with a prong correction as well provided they don't get into an escalated drive through using a prong collar correction. You can check this by having the collar on the dog and giving him a slight pop on the leash with no other stimuli around. If he starts to bounce or spin, chances are his drive escalates through the prong.

To use the prong to correct a dog for lunging at other dogs the method is basically the same as the above example. We clearly tell the dog **NO**, when he begins to lunge and the correction comes one beat after we say **NO**. The dog must be clear that the correction is as a result of his refusal to comply. And that once he complies this correction is turned off. A dog that is looking at you can't get into too much trouble. *Our goal is to get the dog to look at us.* When he is looking away (and headed for trouble), we correct him and reward him afterwards (once he looks back at us).

If you are going to let your dog meet other dogs after he gets into line, I suggest removing the snap from the ring of the prong collar (leaving the leash connected only to the second collar). If you retain the leash in your hands there should be no risk of the prong correction while he is playing with another dog. If you worry that you may have to correct your dog you can make one of two choices: don't introduce your dog to the other dog yet or use the other collar as a correction when your dog is interacting with another dog. I've seen countless problems with people correcting their dogs on a prong collar while the dog is interacting with another dog. Some trainers use this method (correcting with a prong, but it requires a great deal of skill) and if something goes wrong it sets a powerful negative imprint on your dog.

Another method I use on my dog is rewarding corrections. While he is wearing the prong collar, I reward him when I pop the collar before ever correcting him. By teaching him that the correction means reward, you are making the correction much more fair in the dog's mind. This is something I do during the desensitization process. I let the dog wear the collar for a while, and then when I first hook the leash up to the collar I give the leash slight pop. Immediately I praise the dog and give him a treat. Teaching him that the correction means a reward gives the dog a clear picture that there is a reward after a correction, and that corrections can cement the bond created through fair training. Too many people use corrections to create a wall between themselves and their dog. All the corrections I give my dog strengthen our bond.

Corrections are merely a direction from the wrong place to the right place... and that *right place* is full of reward, praise and love.

Build trust and develop a relationship with a dog before you begin training. Engagement over training...

Dog training has inherent risks. I urge you to research and consult a professional for training advice.

Please visit my animal rescue organization and consider supporting our important work:

<http://www.boundangels.org>

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