

## Regrettable Retractable

Written by Janet Goodman, BT Contributor  
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### The dangers outweigh the benefits of these leashes

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og trainers are hard-wired to give advice. As one of these inherently helpful (maybe bossy) people, I offer my thoughts on all things canine -- not to act like a know-it-all, but to educate.

Sometimes I pontificate to save dog owners from potential problems, even heartache, down the pike. They pay me good money to tell them; whether they listen and follow through -- well, that's up to them.

Like other trainers, I've heard the horror stories and learned lessons the hard way, by making my own mistakes (usually the best lessons learned). So I pass these on to clients in the hope of preventing disasters.

One important area of advice regards training equipment. The right stuff can make training easier. The wrong stuff can lead to regret.

Ten years ago I wrangled animal talent for a McDonald's television commercial that aired in Mexico. The talents I provided were two lookalike Golden Retrievers that swapped duties as star of the 30-second spot. All they had to do was walk down a sidewalk, pulling the heck out of one tough actress on the other end of the leash.

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Dressed for the office in a stylish pink suit, she was directed to fall dramatically toward the camera. Out of view was a twin-bed mattress. Take after take, being the pro that she was, she allowed herself to be jolted forward through the air like a stuntwoman, landing face-first.

In real life, though, we don't walk around with a mattress at our feet to cushion the fall. So we ditch the heels for sensible shoes and stride on well-lit streets while walking our dogs. We should also use safe leashes.

Germany's Flexi company made its first retractable leash prototype in 1972, but my initiation to it came in the early 1990s. I owned a boarding kennel at the time, and a customer dropped off her Lab with me for a weekend stay. She walked him into the office on a high-tech-looking retractable.

I opened the door leading to the kennel and fumbled with the thumb-activated braking button, but it was too late. The dog pulled forward and *zizzzzzzizzzzzzzzzz* -- he ran out 20 feet to the end of the cord, barking and jumping at dog pens along the way, getting his nose nipped in the process.

Decades later, I'm still no fan of retractables. Neither is my neighbor (or so I thought). He's had bad experiences with them while walking his midsize dog, Aldo. His belts snapped at the clips on several occasions, and twice his dog barely missed being struck by a car at an intersection. After he suffered a calf laceration by becoming entangled in the cord, I hoped he would've switched to a standard leash, but he hasn't.

These "cutting-edge" leads can cause a host of human health issues. Besides lacerations, finger amputations, eye injuries, skin burns, and bystander injuries are not uncommon. Canine legs, necks, and tails are vulnerable, too, sometimes getting sliced to the bone when cords wrap around them. Cords fray and dogs easily bite through the thin rope; strong pullers like Aldo snap them. Dogs have been run over by vehicles while clipped to retractable leashes.

Aware of the risks, Flexi has outlined them on its website's "Flexi leash safety video" and in the pamphlets that accompany each leash package. *Why, then, do people use them if they're*

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*potentially dangerous*

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For my neighbor, allowing Aldo to walk yards ahead is easy on his bad back. But the usual answer is: *to give pets freedom to explore*. Apartment dwellers love the idea of letting their dogs run on retractables since they lack fenced-in yards. They can purchase products with 6 to 26 feet of “freedom” cord for dogs up to 150 pounds, but the extra lengths encourage bad canine manners (Flexi does state that its leashes are not for uncontrollable or disobedient dogs) like pulling, as well as putting pets in danger (elevators!). In my opinion, the release, brake, and retract button can give users a false sense of security.

Even so, this leash is a top seller for pet supply retailers. The design has been improved by Flexi and other manufacturers. An ergonomically contoured grip often comes with a rubber handle, and 1/4- to 1/2-inch nylon-webbing tape/belting is a better option over thin rope cord. Reflective fabrics make nighttime use safer.

But a double-clip coupler style for walking two dogs at once is no technological advancement in my book; neither is such gadgetry as a water bottle, dish, and waste-bag dispenser stowed in the handle, which distracts from and distorts the basic purpose of a leash -- which is *to control a pet*.

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