

## Reel It In - Why I Don't Like Retractable Leashes

By [Nancy Kerns](#)

There's an old joke about if there's one thing that two dog trainers can agree on, it's that the third one is doing it wrong. But if you know me at all, you know I hate online squabbles; I don't participate in digital fights about training methods or tools. That said, I think I've found something that very nearly ALL dog trainers agree on, and that I will defend anywhere, anytime, and it's this: Retractable leashes have no place in dog training.



It almost reaches the level of a joke: If you go to a dog park or almost any gathering of dog people and their dogs, the worst-behaved dogs will be the ones on retractable leashes. It's sort of a chicken or the egg thing: What came first, the poorly behaved dog or the leash that teaches him nothing?

I get how convenient it is to be able to walk along with your dog on leash and have your dog stop for a moment to smell something or take a quick pee, and you only have to slow your pace for a moment, rather than stop dead. When he's through or he hits the end of the retractable line, he can trot to catch up, and you don't have to scoop up all that line the way you would with a long leash, you can just allow the spring-loaded retractable thingie to wind it up.

However, what do you do when your dog is at or near the end of the line and:

You are suddenly confronted by a loose dog, looking a little aggressive, coming your way, fast.

Someone walks quickly out of a storefront, in between you and your dog.

Your dog suddenly sees a squirrel on the ground across the street and bolts into the street in an effort to reach the squirrel.

The biggest problem is with these and countless other situations, when your dog is more than a couple of feet from you, there is nothing you can do very quickly to get him back to your side. The products can retract only when there is not tension on the line. As you know if you've ever used one, you really cannot grab the part of the cord that retracts into the handle and pull even a smallish strong dog back toward you. About the only way you could pull a dog to safety would be to mash the lock button down, while quickly turning in the opposite direction and trying to call or drag your dog in the other direction – depending on whether you've trained him

to do emergency U-turns or whether he's engaged already with the other dog or still on the hunt for the squirrel.

And to retract the slack when there is a chaotic situation brewing, like when that loose dog – or even one on leash! – is squaring off with your dog, and they are spinning around? Lock to prevent the dog from getting farther away, release to retract, lock, release, lock, release . . . it's darned hard to do in calm circumstances.

When I want a dog to explore his environment without taking him off leash, I use a long line – a 20 or even 30-foot leash. I only use a tool like this in an environment where there are NO other people or dogs who might get tangled up with us, and the line is as smooth and easy to handle as my leash; I can easily grab anywhere on the line and manually reel in the dog if I have to.



Ouch! See what that guy is trying to do? To pull his little dog back toward him? Great way to get a nasty rope burn or even a sliced palm.

And what about the many cases in which someone accidentally dropped the handle, which started dragging on the ground and clattering loudly behind the dog, and spooked him into running in a blind panic into traffic? A dog who takes off dragging a regular leash stands a good chance of being caught by someone who manages to step on or grab the leash. But the retractable leash is likely to retract after being dragged a way, so that it's short and very difficult to grab.

We don't even have to discuss emergency situations to get most trainers to chime in about how useless these tools are. They more or less *train* dogs to pull against pressure, by rewarding/reinforcing the dog when he pulls against the product's spring (there is always some tension, even when the operator isn't pressing the lock button) in order to reach something he wants to investigate. Getting to sniff something he was curious about is a reward – and behaviors that are rewarded get repeated. Simple as that.

Yes, a person can lock the handle and prevent the dog from pulling the line out of the device, preventing him from getting this reward. But then, you may as well just have a fixed-length leash.

As a final point against them, all I can say is, when this blog gets posted to the WDJ Facebook page, go ahead and post your photos of the deep, slashing cuts that you or someone you know has received when a retractable cord got wound around their leg when a dog was going nuts. That should give a little credence to the warnings against these products.

Can anyone honestly make a case *for* the responsible use of retractable leashes?