



Dog Leash Dangers: Blindness, Amputations Blamed on Retractable Dog Leads

Family of Girl, 13, Suing After Snapped Leash Caused Severe Eye Injury

By SARAH NETTER

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It was a shocking sight for a mother -- a piece of metal sticking out of her 12-year-old's eye.

That's what Joy Williams saw after her daughter Dereka was injured last year when a [retractable dog leash](#) broke and the metal clasp snapped her in the face.

"She was like, 'Mom, I can't see! I can't see!'" Williams told ABCNews.com.

The family is now suing Worldwide, Inc., the maker of the SlyDog retractable leash, and Dollar General, the store where they bought it, both to help pay for their daughter's medical expenses and highlight the danger of these types of [dog leashes](#).

Horror stories of injuries, even amputations, caused by retractable dog leashes have circulated on [dog owner](#) boards and forums for years, leading some owners to stop using them.

The leashes typically feature a plastic handle with a locking mechanism that allows owners to control how far their dogs can roam. They're usually made from cord or ribbon-type material that has been blamed for severing fingers as well as burning or lacerating the skin of both dogs and humans who have the unfortunate misstep of getting tangled in them.

A Recall, but Too Late?

Worldwise recalled the SlyDog leash in September, nearly five months after Dereka's accident, saying the metal clasp was known to have bent or broken while in use. But the Williams' Dallas-based attorney, Stephen Drinnon, said the company should have done a better job designing the leash and notified consumers about the dangers of their products.

Injuries reported from the SlyDog leash include facial cuts, broken teeth, eye injuries and a broken collarbone, according to the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission's recall notice. The notice said there were about 223,000 units of the China-manufactured product, which was sold in Dollar General stores for about \$5.

"I will never use another retractable leash," Derrick Williams, Dereka's father, told ABCNews.com

Dereka, now 13, was walking home from a park near her Arlington, Texas, home in April when her 25-pound pitbull puppy Diamond pulled on the leash, snapping it. It was the first time she had used the leash.

"It hurt," Dereka said. "I didn't know what happened at first."

She immediately lost vision in that eye and was rushed to the emergency room, where she underwent the first of three

surgeries to repair the damage. The vision in her left eye is now "better," Derrick Williams said, but she will likely have permanent damage.

A Slow Recovery

After missing the rest of her sixth-grade year, Dereka is seeing a retinal specialist and wears bi-focals. She faces more possible surgeries.

"Now when I play sports I have to wear this protection shield so nothing else hits me in the eye," she said, adding that she plays volleyball and basketball and runs track.

While her grades were high enough to pass her into the seventh grade despite her missed classes, Dereka missed out on the opportunity to try for acceptance into advanced placement courses.

"She was really an outgoing girl. Now she doesn't want to be the freak, if you know what I mean," Drinnon said.

The Williamses are seeking unspecified damages from the two companies.

"They figured a lawsuit was the proper thing to do to hold the company responsible," Drinnon said.

Worldwise declined to comment specifically on the Williams lawsuit, but issued a statement that reads, "We at Worldwise care very much about all of our customers and their pets and are committed to providing them with products that are safe, reliable and functional. On Sept. 3, 2008 we initiated a voluntary recall on our Sly Dog retractable leash. We worked closely with the CPSC and followed their guidelines regarding proper notification of the recall."

Dollar General also declined to comment on Dereka's injury, citing pending litigation, but released a statement that said, in part, "We stand firmly behind the quality of the products we sell in our stores. More than a billion customers a year shop our stores for high-quality products. On the occasion that one of them finds a problem with his purchase, appropriate action is taken immediately. "

Heed Warnings, Use Carefully

Some manufacturers of retractable leashes have gone so far as to print warning labels on the leashes and packaging. One company, [Flexi USA](#), has an entire Web page devoted to dos and don'ts along with a list of potential injuries.

The company, which distributes a variety of leashes manufactured by the German-based company Flexi, recommends not using the retractable leads around infants or children and even using gloves and wearing long pants to prevent injuries.

Ulrich Wuebker, president of Flexi USA, Inc., told ABCNews.com in an e-mailed statement that despite the negative press, retractable leashes do have merit and are used happily and without injury by millions of pet owners.

"Dogs love them," Wuebker said. "They enjoy a little bit of freedom, but the pet parent still has them leashed. Pet parents love them because they allow their dog a little extra space to be a dog. They can sniff around and do their business."

If owners use the correct leash for their dog and use it properly, he said, Flexi leashes are safe.

"Like other products, Flexi brand retractable leashes can be misused," Wuebker said in the e-mail. "The warnings and instructions are included in and on our packaging as well as on the leash itself. This is to educate the dog owner so that they will use the leash in a safe manner."

Losing a Finger

Heather Todd lost a portion of her left index finger in a Flexi retractable leash accident in 2005. Her yellow Labrador retriever, Penny, was hooked to a friend's retractable leash when the dog became excited. The 90-pound dog bolted after something and Todd said she lost control of the handle, which caused the cord to burn her arm. When she instinctively tried to brush the cord off her arm, Todd said her finger got caught and she was pulled to the ground and dragged for four or five feet.

"I look up and there's a finger tip right in front of me," she said, adding that she was in such shock she at first thought the finger was a child's Halloween-type toy. "I didn't comprehend, 'Oh, Heather, there's your fingertip laying there in the sand.'"

Todd ended up settling with Flexi out of court. Neither Todd nor Flexi would comment on the settlement details, but Wuebker told ABCNews.com via e-mail that because Todd borrowed the leash from another person, she didn't have the benefit of being able to reach the warnings and safety instructions.

"Also, her dog was too big for the leash and had behavioral problems," he said.

'Not as Magical as They Claim to Be'

The injuries aren't always to the human. Dog owners have also reported severe lacerations and burns on their dogs' legs and bodies, some requiring veterinary attention. Others have reported accidentally dropping the lead and their dogs taking off at a dead run, trying to break free from heavy retractable leash handle they are dragging behind them.

Jamie Damato, a certified dog trainer and behavioral consultant from Chicago, said she banned all forms of retractable leashes from her classes when she opened her dog training business, Animal Sense, in 2000. In the beginning, she kept photos of injuries on hand to show owners who were insistent on using them.

"As I learned more about training and behavior & it became clear to me that they are not as magical as they claim to be," she said.

She also carries a personal reminder in the form of a scar on her leg where she got burned by a leash cord more than 10 years ago.

One of the few benefits of the leashes, Damato said, is that they allow owners to work on their dogs' recall skills in large open areas without leaving the dogs untethered altogether.

Damato said it's not just the injury factor that drove her away from retractable leashes. Letting a dog roam too far, especially when training, allows the dog to find all sorts of trouble. Some owners, she said, have watched in horror as their dogs darted into traffic while on a retractable leash while they fumbled with the lock.

"If your dog is 16 to 18 feet in front of you & it's almost impossible to have the response you want," she said.

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