

Underground Electronic Containment Systems for Pet Dogs

By Karen Rinald Mast, CPDT-KSA

As a dog trainer who does in-home behavior consults I have observed the negative impact of electronic containment systems upon family pets. The training methods I advocate emphasize positive reinforcement. In a nutshell, positive reinforcement adds something the dog wants as a reward when the dog has performed behavior that we want to get stronger or to be repeated. This training method is very effective and even when mistakes are made, no negative impact is made upon the dog's emotional state. The dog is safe to learn and experiment without fear of reprimand. On the opposite end of the behavior shaping quadrant is positive punishment. Positive punishment methods add something to decrease the likelihood the behavior will be repeated. Punishment-based methods may seem to work to stop some behaviors, but may have a negative consequence. Depending upon the personality of the dog, as a result, he may become aggressive, anxious, or shutdown his behavior. The dog no longer feels secure. Underground electronic containment systems operate on the same principle as punishment-based training methods.

The companies that sell these systems market them as "safe", a way to provide your dog more "freedom" outdoors. But are they really safe? And do they really provide your dog with more freedom? Can we be sure the additional freedom also provides adequate security to your dog and to those who walk by your home?

With marketing that ensures safety and reliability, moderate costs as compared to many above ground fence options, homes located in neighborhoods with fencing restrictions, and the desire to ensure that your dog gets plenty of exercise, the attraction to this type of barrier for your dog may seem appealing. But let's think about this for a minute.

➤ Many of my clients who have underground electronic fences installed have admitted that their dog has gone through the fence at least once. One dog gave chase after a bird not giving the brief moment of pain a second thought. Once a dog is outside the fencing, the reward for returning to his yard is usually not high enough for the dog to take the hit to come back. A veterinarian told me that

approximately half of the dogs that come to her practice hit by car are wearing an electronic fence collar.

- If you have a lot of foot or car traffic going by your property, your dog may become a victim of "barrier frustration". He can see activity going by but as he attempts to approach he receives a tone or shock. He may associate receiving the shock with people who approach him.
- Vehicle operators driving by who cannot see the "invisible" fence line may swerve and cause an accident or injury, because they worry that a loose dog is about to run out into the road.
- Dogs left outdoors unattended are at risk of being stolen. We can no longer turn a blind eye to the harsh reality that came close to us in Virginia in the past year with the Michael Vick case bringing dog-fight operations to the media forefront. Unsupervised dogs left outdoors may be stolen for use as bait dogs by members of dog-fighting rings.
- Many of these electronic fences give an audible warning prior to the physical shock. Dogs may become sound sensitive to other tones emitted by electronic devices, such as cell phones or voicemail machines.
- A thunderstorm or other unknown events may cause the collar on the dog's neck to malfunction. This may traumatize a dog who now cannot find a way to escape the shocking sensation.
- Other dogs, animals and people (friends, service people) can enter your yard, while your dog may not feel that he can escape. Your dog may have a fight or flight response, if he feels threatened, and if the flight option is not open to him, he may become aggressive.
- The equipment requires ongoing maintenance. The batteries need to be checked and replaced regularly on the collar. The collar needs to be fitted properly. The dog's neck should be checked daily for any indication of soreness or a neck burn.

So what are your alternatives to provide safe outdoor play for your canine companion? Always supervise your dog when he is outside. When you are not home, your dog is safest inside your home. If your dog is not reliably housebroken, see the Additional References listed at the end for housebreaking and confinement ideas. Provide him with safe toys to alleviate boredom – a food-stuffed Kong often works well. If you have an active dog that requires lots of exercise, consider building a secure physical fence or visiting a neighbor with a fenced yard for outdoor playtime, or use a 30'-50' long line secured to your wrist during play. For more aerobic exercise teach your dog to retrieve using reward-based training methods. Retrieve allows your dog the opportunity to run at his own pace, teaches him to play a cooperative game with you and teaches him to relinquish items to you upon request. For dogs who do not require as much exercise simply getting out with them a couple times a day for a brisk mile long walk may be enough. If you really cannot find the time or do not have the ability to get your dog adequate exercise, perhaps a breed that isn't so high energy, or a different type of pet might be best for your lifestyle.

To consider further about the impact of aversive techniques on your canine partner, set up this game with a friend: No talking. Your friend will write the name of an object in a room on a hidden card. Each time you take a step closer to the object, your friend will hand you \$1. Each time you take a step further from the object, nothing happens. When you get within 2 feet of the object, your friend gives you \$2. When you actually touch the object your friend gives you \$10. Observe how excitedly you offer to move around the room, how quickly you locate the object and how relaxed and happy you are when you have actually found the target object. How do you feel about your friend at the end of this exercise? How do you feel about the game? Do you want to play again? Start the game over with another target object. Each time you step closer to the object nothing happens; each time you step further from the object, your friend presses the 'test' button on your smoke

alarm. Do you begin to get more tentative with your steps? Do you begin to worry, become anxious or get agitated? When you finally touch the target object, you get \$1. How do you feel? Are you excited? Or do you just feel relieved that this game is over? How do you feel about your friend at the end of this exercise?

Additional References

For more information on housebreaking and a "long-term confinement area" set-up see: www.openpaw.org or www.dogstardaily.com/free-downloads and download **free** the PDF – *Before you get your puppy* by Ian Dunbar, DVM, reference Chapter 4 Errorless Housetraining and Chewtoy-training.

To learn more about positive reinforcement dog training:

Culture Clash by Jean Donaldson

The Power of Positive Dog Training by Pat Miller

To learn more about how "advancements" in our high-tech world may be affecting our dogs I encourage you to read: *Through a Dog's Ear* by Joshua Leeds & Susan Wagner, DVM, MS

To learn more about the emotional experiences of our dogs:

For the Love of a Dog by Patricia B. McConnell, PhD

To view a scientific study of shock collars used on dogs in training:

Applied Animal Behaviour Science Vol 85 pp.319-334, available online at www.Sciencedirect.com

Training dogs with help of the shock collar: short and long term behavioral effects by Matthijs B.H. Schilder and Joanne A.M. van der Borg