

SIMPLY SHOCKING

Pat Miller - Dog Trainer

Rufus is a typical adolescent Labrador Retriever: Large, full of energy, and eager to explore beyond the boundaries of his Richmond , Utah , yard when released from the confinement of his pen. The Ashbys, his owners, are a typical Lab family: Dad, mom, and several kids, all of whom possess a strong desire to be responsible pet owners.

As often happens, Rufus' energy was a bit too much for the younger children. Despite several attempts to train him not to jump up, he was still knocking the little Ashbys flat. And despite the family's best intentions, Rufus was not cooperating with their efforts to keep him within the limits of his own unfenced yard.

Imagine the Ashbys' delight one day when, shopping at their local "big box" pet supply store, they came across a product that promised to solve both problems with the push of a button. The product combines an underground electronic containment system with an additional remote control unit for use with supervised training. In other words, a shock collar. The family bought the unit, took it home, and started training Rufus.

They used the product for a few days and were quite pleased. Their dog was quickly learning not to jump on the kids, and life with Rufus was already becoming easier. The Ashbys made plans to lay the underground wire for the containment system over the upcoming weekend. Meanwhile, Rufus was confined to his pen, wearing his collar, while the family was gone all day.

Upon arriving home one rainy day afternoon that week, Darren Ashby, an electronic engineer, sent his oldest son out to the pen to take Rufus for a walk. The boy came back in and said Rufus wouldn't let anyone get near him. Dad went out to help, and was horrified by what he found.

"What I saw made me sick," says Ashby. "Rufus had this sickly green color around his neck, under the training collar. There was this nasty wet/burnt hair and flesh smell. Something was obviously wrong. I carefully removed the collar to find a huge gaping hole in Rufus' neck, right under one of the training collar prongs."

Dr. Susan Benson, of the Animal Medical Clinic in Preston , Idaho , treated Rufus' injuries.

Dr. Benson says the incident has made her much more wary of the fence systems. She feels the collars should never be left on dogs who are unsupervised – which, of course, defeats the purpose for most dog owners, who want to use the systems to give the dogs free access to their yards while the owners are away at work all day.

What's Not to Like?

There is no question that underground electronic containment systems are immensely popular. They are readily available in pet stores, on-line, and from most pet-supply catalogs. They have

become as common as fleas, and no wonder – for as little as \$125, the responsible pet owner can let Fido play on up to five acres – an area that would cost thousands of dollars to fence otherwise. For just another \$100, an owner can purchase a system that promises to fence up to 25 acres – extension kits cost \$50 per half-acre, for a total of \$1500 for the full 25 acre capacity. Other options include a solar-powered system, or a collar that also promises to shock the dog for barking while it keeps him in the invisibly fenced area.

In addition, the electronic containment systems can be used in communities that prohibit visible fences, a growing and unfortunate trend. They can be installed in terrain where a physical fence would be difficult or impossible to erect. From the average dog owner's perspective, what's not to like?

Unfortunately, from Fido's point of view, plenty, including but not limited to the potential for ugly green electrical burns around the neck. Unfortunately for the Fidos of the world who are living behind electronic fences, none of the companies that produce the fences are very forthcoming about the negative aspects of electronic containment systems. And there are many.

As a professional trainer and behavior consultant, I have had ample opportunities to deal with the fallout from shock fences that have caused problems with clients' dogs. I also regularly hear electronic fence horror stories from my peers within the professional dog training community. I am admittedly biased against using shock collars in training to start with, so I undoubtedly seize upon every new report of a shock collar-related problem to support my position.

My philosophy of training is firmly grounded in gentle methods that encourage a relationship between dog and human based on mutual trust and respect. The idea of deliberately shocking a beloved family member around the neck (or anywhere else, for that matter) is so repugnant to me that I cannot conceive of a training situation in which I would be willing to use a shock collar for my dogs, or for anyone else's. But malfunctioning units and emotional argument aside, there are many other reasons why I vehemently steer clients far away from non-visible fences.

Dogs Are Vulnerable

One of those reasons has been hanging around our house for three days now. A black Labrador with a fence collar on visits us from time to time – mute testimony to the fact that the collars don't always work.

Shelter workers from around the country tell of the numbers of stray dogs who are brought in wearing electronic fence collars. When their owners retrieve the dogs, some will nonchalantly admit that they neglected to replace the batteries. Others explain that their dogs will run through the fence to chase a squirrel, or to follow another dog, or to visit an alluring female in season.

When for the umpteenth time I return our visiting Lab to his home a half-mile away, the owner tells me that the fence is out (again!) because of a recent electrical storm. He asks me how he is supposed to keep his dog home in the meantime – as if there is no other rational alternative but to let him run loose. Bring him in the house, I answer – but I know my suggestion falls on deaf ears.

Not only does the system give a dog's owner a false sense of security about the reliability of the containment, it also fails to protect the dog from intruders. Marauding canines, the dog thieves, neighborhood bullies, the angry service persons, rabid skunks – all have easy access to the dog who lives inside a fenceless fence.

A Biting Commentary

In addition to leaving the dog vulnerable to attacks, electronic containment systems sometimes fail to provide any physical barrier to protect unwary passers-by from the dog. The list of documented cases of non-visible fence-related aggression grows longer by the day.

The stimulus of fully visible passing cars, kids on bikes, people walking their dogs, squirrels running up trees, etc., tends to goad some dogs into a state of angry arousal. If the dog is aroused enough to test the limits of the fence he gets shocked, which conditions him to associate the pain of the shock with whatever he was focused on when he got shocked.

Further, any unsuspecting visitor who crosses the invisible barrier into the dog's reach can be the unwitting victim of the dog's pent-up frustration. Worse, if the dog's arousal reaches a high enough peak that he runs through the fence, the immediacy of that shock is likely to add to the intensity of the dog's aggressive behavior in that moment of attack

I just got off the phone an hour ago with a family that is looking for a new home for their 8-year-old Schnauzer, Max, who has lived in his backyard within a nonvisible shock fence since he was a youngster. About two years ago, Max began exhibiting some disturbing aggressive behavior.

His owners believe that a serviceperson who was intolerant of dogs may have kicked Max, setting off an escalating spiral of aggression that just recently resulted in a Level 3 bite to the leg of a visiting child. (See Box – Ian Dunbar's Bite Level Classifications). Without a physical fence, they could neither protect Max from the serviceperson, nor, more recently, protect the child from Max.

Compounding the problem, their homeowner's association rules prohibit physical fences, so, even recognizing the drawbacks, they continue to use the electronic fence to keep Max contained. In addition to the ongoing danger this presents both to the dog and to anyone who crosses the fence line, any additional shocks to Max's neck – even the triggering of the warning tone – are likely to add to his level of stress, arousal and aggression, increasing the risk of more bites.

The first critical step to modifying aggression requires eliminating the conditions that contribute to it; in this case, the totality of environmental circumstances created by the fence.

Max has always been a backyard dog and the parents are reluctant to try to bring him in the house. They realize that putting Max in a small chain-link pen for the rest of his life is not a reasonable solution. The children are devastated at the thought of losing their canine pal, and I had to deliver the bad news that finding a lifelong loving home – or any good home - for an

eight-year-old dog who bites, is not a very realistic option. Their choices are to significantly alter Max's (and their own) lifestyle to better protect him and manage his behavior, or euthanasia.

Three months ago, I did a private consultation with a woman whose Airedale had started running through the electronic fence and biting. When Andy was a pup, he was allowed to run loose in his laid-back mountain community just outside Chattanooga . As more families moved into the neighborhood, Andy's wandering started to draw complaints, so his owner had an electronic fence installed. This particular system included training as part of the installation package, so a man came out to the house to teach Andy that if he ignored the tone that warned him he was approaching the fence boundary, he would get a shock. The system had appeared to work well for several years. But recently, for no reason that his owner could discern, Andy had started going through his fence.

The first incident involved a Golden Retriever passing by outside the fence on a leash. Andy rolled the dog, but no injuries resulted. The owner wrote the incident off as a one-time thing, and life went on as usual. A couple of months later, Andy ran through the fence again, this time after a small dog. The canine victim suffered injuries serious enough to require veterinary attention, and Andy's owner realized something needed to be done. She called the fence company, and they sent someone out to "retrain" Andy to the fence.

The "trainer" put a shock collar around Andy's neck and one around his groin. He led Andy to the fence and shocked him repeatedly. According to his owner, Andy screamed and bit at his flanks; the sight was so gruesome that his owner couldn't watch – she went inside and the torture continued without her. When the trainer was done he came in and told her that Andy had bitten him in the leg – but there was no harm done –he announced somewhat proudly that he was protected by the leather chaps he had begun wearing because so many dogs tried to bite him during the training.

Two weeks later Andy charged through the fence again, knocked a young girl into a ditch and inflicted Level 4 bites. Andy was ultimately euthanized.

Other negative reactions, while not as extreme, give us clues to how very traumatic the shock collars can be. Some dogs refuse to go into their yards at all after being introduced to the system. Others must be loaded into the family car and driven across the fence line – even when not wearing the collar - just to be taken for a walk around the block.

Being Responsible

One of the leading underground fence companies proudly states: "Our mission is to keep your pets safe. We believe in Safe Pets and Happy People." You might think that companies whose ads tend to emphasize the advantages of keeping your dog safely confined in your yard would be sure to provide consumer warnings about the potential hazards related to their use, and would bend over backwards to make amends for any inadvertent malfunction of the product.

Not so, according to Darren Ashby, the owner of Rufus, the burned dog I mentioned at the beginning of this article. Ashby sent the company a letter of complaint – complete with graphic

photographs of his dog's wounds – and after a delay, got a response. The company offered to pay the vet bill, but only if Ashby signed a document stating that the company was not at fault. The letter stated that Ashby had two days to decide whether he would sign the statement.

When Ashby called the company to voice his complaint, the contact person told him that the company's lawyers said it was Ashby's fault for leaving the collar on his dog in the rain. She told him his only alternative to signing the document was to sue. Ashby read the product manual from front to back, and is adamant that there were no warnings about using the collar in inclement weather. He is undecided about whether to pursue legal action.

Rufus was lucky – he survived the trauma of his collar experience. Andy was not so lucky. The jury is still out on Max. There are countless other dogs out there struggling with the sometimes lethal uncertainties of the non-visible electronic shock collar fence. Some of those dogs will lose the struggle. Don't even take the chance that your dog might be one of them.

SIDEBAR

IAN DUNBAR'S BITE LEVEL CLASSIFICATIONS

Ian Dunbar, noted trainer, behaviorist, author, creator of "Sirius Puppy Training" and founder of the Association of Pet Dog Trainers, has classified the severity of bite damage in order to enable trainers to discuss them using a common vocabulary. His classifications are as follows:

Level 1- dog was scary but no wound pathology. No skin contact. Obnoxious behavior but no contact.

Level 2 - Skin contact by teeth but no skin puncture. May be nicks and slight bleeding caused by movement of teeth but no punctures.

Most incidents are level one and two and are easily workable.

Level 3 - One to four punctures from a single bite with no punctures deeper than half-length of the dog's canine teeth. May be lacerations in single direction due to movement being pulled away. Level 3 can be bad due to tear of one puncture into a laceration. There is a huge transition between 2 and 3. There are severities within the level. We are now talking about what is appropriate vs. what is inappropriate. Dog punctures are inappropriate. Really look at the level three bites.

A puncture is a little hole. A laceration is a triangle shaped wound but not a puncture.

Level 4 bites - One to four punctures from single bite with at least one puncture deeper than half the length of dog's canine teeth. May be deep bruising around the wound (dog held on for x seconds and bore down) or lacerations in both directions (Dog held on and shook its head from side to side)

Level 5 - multiple bite incidents with at least two level 4 bites

Level 6 - Flesh consumed or victim dead

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