Association of Pet Behaviour Counsellors

The Ethics of Shock-Collar Containment Fences for Dogs and Cats, 10th May 2011



Is it acceptable to use electric shocks to contain your pets?

Containment or invisible fences are currently being advertised in the UK and further afield, as an effective way of ensuring pets remain within a certain area e.g. a garden. Invisible fences are reputed to be more effective than conventional fencing for containing your pets, and give your pet freedom while keeping them safe too.

Sounds ideal! But let's look at what invisible fences actually are.

Electric fences have been used to contain livestock since the 1930s. The idea of controlling animals and keeping them in an enclosure, or excluding them from certain areas, without fencing (invisible or containment fencing) started nearly four decades ago. Invisible fences work by laying signal-emitting wires under ground, to surround a predetermined area e.g. your garden. Your cat or dog wears a receiver

collar, and if they approach the buried wire, they receive a shock as a punishment for getting too close to the boundary. (Umstatter, 2011). Some systems offer animals a chance to avoid the shock, by emitting a warning sound when the animal is getting too close. If the animal persists, the shock is administered. The theory is, your cat or dog will learn that, if they approach the barrier, they will be shocked. Approaching the barrier should therefore decrease, as your pet will want to avoid the shock.

Advocates of these systems assure potential buyers that the systems are safe for your cats and dogs, but given the lack of research that has been carried out on the subject, I'm not sure that is a safe claim. Indeed, these systems have recently been made illegal on the grounds of welfare in Wales. Let's look at some of the concerns of opponents to the use of invisible fencing.

1) Shock collars probably cause pain and fear in order to be effective When we are training animals (or humans, for that matter), if we rely on the use of punishment to decrease a particular behaviour, the punishment must be aversive enough to create a negative emotional response (Blackwell and Casey, 2006). In other words, if an animal really wants to perform a behaviour like leaving the garden, the punishment s/he receives when they attempt to do so must be painful or unpleasant enough to make them change their minds. As no animal is the same, this level of punishment will vary between individuals. This means that we risk using a much higher shock than is necessary to "do the job". It's also possible to use a shock that is not aversive enough, and in this case, an animal may get used to or ignore the shock, meaning that successively stronger and stronger punishments are necessary.

2) Motivation changes, so low level shocks may not be effective

Circumstances change, and so motivation changes. For example, at a time when not much is going on outside the boundary, the required intensity of shock needed to keep a dog within the boundary may be relatively low. However, the shock level might need to be high to stop a dog passing the barrier if s/he has just spotted another dog to play with on the other side of the barrier. Therefore, in order to maximise the chance the shocks are sufficient to stop the pet crossing the boundary, a relatively high level needs to be used at all times.

3) Other animals can still freely enter the territory

It is very important to remember that the invisible fence does not prevent other animals from entering the containment area. Other potentially aggressive cats, dogs, or even foxes, could enter the containment area, leaving collared pets in a very vulnerable position. The shocks administered may not be enough to stop an animal in danger from leaving the containment area. When your pet then tries to return home once danger has passed, the shocks will be applied, regardless of the circumstances.

4) We just don't have the evidence to support the ethical use of these systems There has not been sufficient research to guarantee that long-term use of containment fences does not cause frustration, fear, pain and/or physical injury. Indeed, some research has suggested that wearing of the close fitting collars with blunt prongs used with containment fencing (necessary to make the contact with the skin of the animal to enable transfer of the electrical current), can result in skin irritation, contact necrosis, and serious bacterial infection (Polsky, 1994). The potential psychological damage done by the use of such systems will be more difficult to study, but work is on going.

We do have some information on the use of shock collars to train pet dogs, however. The application of shocks can cause a physiological stress response in dogs. Application of shocks can also lead to responses associated with fear and distress e.g. yelping, struggling, biting and even defecation and urination.

There is also the risk that an animal will not associate the punishment with what we are trying to associate it with. An example cited by Blackwell and Casey (2006) discusses the case of a dog being trained to avoid an invisible fence installed in the garden. The dog was fitted with a collar, and was trained to avoid the boundary by being walked up to the boundary on the lead by the owner. Rather than learning to avoid the boundary, the dog learned to avoid the owner putting the lead on in the garden, by using aggression. There is always a risk that pets will associate the shock with anything that, by coincidence, appears in the environment simultaneously, e.g. a child, another pet, or you!

Until sufficient work is carried out to make a welfare judgement on these systems, pet owners would be well advised to stick to strategies that are tried and tested.

5) What happens if the system fails?

As animals must wear the receiver collars (which are quite bulky in some cases) at all times, there are risks that the collar may get caught on something e.g. a tree branch, and cause the animal wearing it distress or injury (Umstatter, 2011). The device must also be monitored and adjusted as the animal grows to ensure a comfortable fit. Of course, similar arguments could be presented for the use of less controversial pet protection techniques e.g. pets wearing identity collars could get caught on something

and regular fencing would require as much monitoring (if not more) than the shock collar your pet is wearing. However, breakaway collars are available for pets that snap open easily if caught on something. Regarding the fencing, it may seem labour intensive to check and maintain fencing, but I'd rather invest time here than worry that my chosen strategy could be doing untold damage to the welfare of my pets. There is also the very real risk of collar malfunction, when repeated electric shocks occur due to faulty collars (Umstatter, 2011). Indeed, the collar may cease to work at all (if batteries run out, for example) which would necessitate undertaking the whole training process again. Your pet will also have to wear the collar forever, as studies have shown that pets may learn that shocks are only applied when the collar is worn, leading to the unwanted behaviour returning when the collar is removed (Polsky, 1994).

6) Other strategies are available!

Gardens should be well fenced, and dogs well trained to eliminate the need for shocking your pet. Find an APBC member near you to help you keep your dog under control kindly. Cats can be successfully kept exclusively indoors, if their complex needs are catered for. If you would like your cat to have access to the great outdoors, the Feline Advisory Bureau provides excellent advice on fencing and purpose built enclosures that give cats the most freedom possible, without the need for punishment. Properly designed fencing not only keeps in your cat, it can keep out intruding dangerous dogs, foxes or local stray cats, something which a containment electric fence cannot do. Other methods may seem more time consuming or expensive than invisible fence options, but ethically we cannot afford to use techniques which may cause harm, when we have access to methods that are significantly less likely to do so.

If your circumstances cannot be made safe for keeping animals without the use of shock collars, perhaps you should consider not keeping animals until you can keep them safely without punishment. Helping out at a local rescue shelter will mean you can still care for animals, and help charities that are struggling for resources in these difficult financial times.

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Blackwell, E., and Casey, R., (2006). The use of shock collars and their impact on the welfare of dogs: A review of current literature. Department of Clinical Veterinary Science, University of Bristol.