

Visible Problems - Electronic Devices and Aversive-laden Collars are NOT the ideal fence

- Pat Miller

With more than ten years' field experience under his belt, the veteran humane officer, from Santa Clara County, California, thought he had seen and heard just about everything. Then he got the call from a hysterical woman who had come home from work to find that her dog was being shocked non-stop by his electronic collar. "Please hurry," she begged. "He's totally crazed, and when we try to touch him we get shocked. We can't get the collar off him!"

The officer rushed to the scene. When he arrived he found that the owners had managed to throw a rug over the dog, restrain him, and cut off the offending collar with a knife. The dog was still so severely traumatized by the experience that he refused to allow anyone near. The woman vowed never to use her underground fence system again.

Electronic fences and their partners - collars that deliver an aversive agent - have been around for more than 20 years. They seem like the perfect canine confinement alternative to a solid physical fence. They are often marketed as the ideal fencing solution to homeowner association fence prohibitions and for problematic, difficult-to-fence, steep, rocky and rugged living spaces.

But while occurrences of a collar shorting out and administering repeated shocks to a hapless, helpless dog are relatively rare, there are other drawbacks to using electronic fencing systems. A conscientious owner will weigh all the pros and cons before deciding whether or not to invest in this sort of "fencing" system.

How do they work?

Electronic fences rely on the transmission of a radio signal from a wire or some other transmitter that is typically buried or mounted in an unobtrusive location on the dog owner's property. The radio signal is broadcast within a specific zone, following the contours of the individual layout. The dog wears a battery-operated receiver on a special collar, which picks up the radio signals when the dog enters the special zone. Most of the systems are programmed so that a "warning tone" is emitted when the dog first approaches the radio transmission area, and, if he remains or travels further into the zone, follows up with an aversive stimulus.

The most commonly used aversive is an electric shock, delivered to the dog's neck by metal (electrically conducting) prongs set in the dog's collar. A recent technological innovation provides for some systems to deliver a burst of citronella spray as the aversive instead of an electric shock.

The best of the electronic fence makers teach the dog owners how to condition the dogs to the fence. "Training flags" are installed around the perimeter of the dog "safe"

territory, to give him a visual hint of its shape and size. For the first few days, it is suggested that the owner applies tape over the prongs on the electrical collar, to minimize any shock that the dog receives, and keep the dog on a leash. The owner is instructed to walk around the property, allowing the dog to approach the forbidden zones and hear the warning tone. The owner is to pull or call the dog back into the safe area, and then praise the dog.

The next phase involves removing the tape, and allowing the dog (who is still on a leash) further into the danger zone, where he experiences a correction. Again, the owner brings the dog back into the safe zone, praising his retreat from the forbidden area. This is followed by a few more days of off-leash, but supervised experiences, and finally, removal of the training flags. Whether the aversive is a shock or a spray, in most cases it takes only a few applications for the dog to learn that the tone means “Bad things happen here.”

Advantages of virtual fences

There are certainly advantages to electronic fences. They are generally less expensive than a physical fence. Systems range in cost from \$120 to \$400, and can cover anything from small yard to a 100-acre parcel, depending on the brand. Variation in cost depends in large part on the features included in the system package such as adjustable levels of shock strength, rechargeable batteries, and combination fence and no-bark or fence and remote trainer systems. If you are considering investing in an electronic fence, compare features carefully in order to be sure you get the brand that best suits your needs.

Electronic fences are easier to install than a traditional fence. One system uses a wire that is buried a few inches underground, a process that is much less labor-intensive than digging post holes and building fences, especially in rocky soil or on steep brushy slopes. Another type of fence doesn't even require a buried wire, but instead uses transmitters on “emitter posts” that are inserted into the ground at intervals around the property. Consumers can install the fences themselves, or hire one of the many landscapers and builders who have experience in underground fence installation. Some companies will provide a list of certified fence installers on request. For those who simply prefer the aesthetics of a fenceless yard or are faced with homeowner association constraints, electronic fences can keep a dog contained without obstructing the view or violating neighborhood sensibilities.

The Negative Side

Paul Miller, now director of the Chattanooga Animal Services program in Tennessee, was the Santa Clara humane officer who responded to the call of a dog being shocked by his collar a decade ago. Ten more years of experience in the field haven't softened his opinion of the product. He argues that electronic fences don't provide adequate containment to reasonably guarantee a dog's safety. “I can't tell you exactly how many stray dogs I've seen wearing electronic fence collars,” he says, “but it's a lot. Owners forget to replace weak and dying batteries and dogs are soon free to come and go at will.

Many owners who come in to shelters to retrieve their shock-collar-sporting wayward hounds will admit that they were aware the batteries were weak and they hadn't bothered to replace them."

Another minus: Some dogs seem to have no trouble braving the strong corrections imposed on them by a working collar with fresh batteries if they are presented with sufficiently enticing stimuli: a female in season, a fast-moving cat, a child on a bicycle, a postal worker. And then the dog is stuck outside the fence without sufficient motivation to risk the shock to get back in! For this reason, certain breeds, especially large dogs bred for guardian jobs or dogs with strong hunting drives, make poor candidates for these systems.

Another important consideration is the fact that an electronic fence does nothing to protect your dog from outside harm. The neighborhood canine bully can still enter your yard and attack your dog. Bad people can still come onto your property and steal or torment your dog. (We've even heard of one report of an expensive electronic collar being stolen right off of its dog!) Also, these electronic fences don't keep children or delivery people from approaching your house and being attacked or bitten by your dog.

Finally, dogs with especially long or thick coats may have to have their necks shaved in order for the prongs (and the corrective shocks) to reach their skin. Such disfigurement is not acceptable to all owners.

"Mild" is a matter of opinion

Dog owners also need to be concerned about the unintended negative side effects of punishment. Despite the euphemisms used in promotional materials that call the aversive electric shock a "mild electrical stimulus," a "stimulus distraction," a "tingle" or a "tickle," it is, in fact, an electric shock.

In November 1998, while attending the Association of Pet Dog Trainers annual conference and trade show in Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, I watched as a number of dog trainers tested an electric collar by wrapping it around their own hands. (The equipment was provided by one of the electronic fence manufacturers, who had a trade booth at the convention.) Different people reacted to varying levels of shock with significantly different levels of sensitivity. While some felt nothing at the lowest setting and only a mild sensation at level three, others described a mildly painful sensation at level one and unpleasant, even intolerable pain at the higher settings. (The shock was felt on the hand, not on the more sensitive neck area. Product representatives refused to allow the human Guinea pigs to test the collars on their necks.) There is no reason to think that our different dogs would not also experience different sensitivities to electric shocks.

The use of punishment in training, especially a punishment as intense as an electric shock, risks irreparable harm to the mutual trust that is critically important in the dog-human relationship. During the training process the dog may associate the shock or spray with the owner's presence and end up fearing the owner.

Sensitive dogs can be seriously traumatized by just one administration of the punishing aversive. Some dogs may refuse to enter the yard at all after being shocked or sprayed, especially if the yard is small, with a limited amount of “free” space where the dog can feel safe. One Monterey County, California, dog owner reports that while she loves the electronic fence system because it allows her dogs to run loose on her several acre property (which she couldn’t otherwise afford to fence), her Komondor is so respectful of the boundary that the dog won’t cross it even when not wearing the collar. The owner has to load her dog into the car and drive across the wire just to take the dog for a walk around the neighborhood.

What are the alternatives?

What are you supposed to do if you live in an area where fencing is prohibited, prohibitively expensive, or simply not feasible? You can keep Rover in the house, train him to come when called, and allow him outside only under direct supervision. You can install a cable runner, although tying a dog up creates its own set of risks and problems. (See the article “Fit To Be Tied” in the July 1999 issue of *Whole Dog Journal* for a discussion of this topic.) You can purchase a chain-link kennel run to provide safe confinement for Rover when you aren’t able to personally supervise his exercise. Or you can move to a neighborhood that allows physical fences. Some people, however, feel the benefits of an electronic fence system outweigh the negatives of the alternatives. We’d grudgingly acknowledge the potential usefulness of the system, provided it’s used in the following limited circumstances.

Because of the potential for an electronic fence to malfunction, for your dog to simply “run through” it and escape, and for predators to enter your property and injure your dog, we suggest using the system only when you are home and able to monitor its use. This means not using the system when you are not at home (even just for a few minutes), or at night (or any other time you may be sleeping). You must check on your dog constantly, establishing visual contact with him at least every five minutes or so when he is “confined” by the fence and nothing else. And the collar must be removed whenever the fence is not being used as the primary barrier (when the dog is safely confined in the house, for instance). Failing to do all these things exposes the dog to all the various dangers discussed above, while simultaneously giving the owner a false sense of security.

Of course, if your dog is reliably trained to come to you when he is called and you are keeping him under this sort of close supervision, you probably don’t need this sort of system! Which strikes at the heart of our objections to electronic fences: They are really designed as a “convenience” device for people who like having a dog, and who don’t want it to run away, but who are unwilling or unable to go the extra mile to absolutely ensure the safety of their dogs.

There are exceptions. We have met dog owners, for instance, who keep their well trained dogs under close supervision, but who maintain the electronic fence as a sort of “emergency back up” barrier for their dogs because they live on a busy road, and even an extremely rare, quick trip “off the property” could result in death.

In our opinion, however, there is nothing that can replace training, supervision, and that timeless tool for good neighbors everywhere: a purely “visible,” solid, well maintained fence.

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