

Invisible Fences: The Bad and The Ugly

Recently, a client emailed to ask me what I thought about invisible shock containment fences. Her dog already has some serious fear issues and I related to her that using this type of device would surely cause those issues to get worse and all of the work she had put into trying to help her dog be more confident would surely go out the window. She was told by a representative that her dog would not have to be shocked, that he would "train him to the warning signal". This is simply not true.

So, how DO shock fences work? Well, the company comes out and sets the wire in the ground at your specified boundaries. Then they turn it on, put the collar with the transmitter on your dog with two prongs that touch your dog's skin up against his neck. Then they walk the dog up to the boundary line. Just before your dog is shocked, they hear a "warning tone". Then, as, they cross the boundary line, they receive a shock. The "trainers" or you do this over and over until the dog "understands" the warning tone predicts he is about to be shocked and turns away from the boundary line. Why does he turn away from the boundary line? Because he has learned to associate the sound of the warning tone with the pain around his neck and he wants to avoid this in the future.

When I explained this to my client, she stated: "Geez, they sure do a good job convincing you they don't hurt the dog." They sure do! However, from a scientific perspective, if the dog did not find the fence more painful or stressful than he found leaving the yard to be fun, the fences simply wouldn't work! It's the principles of learning theory!

Let's think about this. The fencing companies tell you that the feeling of the collar is not more than what you would feel if you drag your feet across the carpet and then touch something metal. That may be true if the collar is set at the lowest level and maybe not. From Wikipedia: ***"Some owners who self test collars on themselves have purported that some collars with no available settings but only on and off give shocks that are equal to that of sticking a finger in a light socket, while others with collars that have setting dials, show that depending on the setting, that even the mildest setting gives an unwanted pain, while hitting a threshold on the dial which they refuse to go any higher because of how much it hurts."***

In fact, I think it is a REALLY good idea before making any kind of decision about whether or not you want to use one of these systems, to go ahead and try the collar out at every level on your own neck first!

Unfortunately, many dogs need higher levels of the shock to make the feeling aversive enough to them to work to avoid it by staying away from the boundary lines. And, let's face it, doesn't it hurt enough when you get a static electric shock to elicit some sort of unpleasant reaction from you? What if you got that feeling every time you entered your kitchen? Wouldn't it make you mad enough to try to fix it and if you couldn't figure it out, wouldn't you get a feeling of wary anticipation of the shock every time you were forced to go into that room? I know that I used to own a car that shocked me each time I got out and shut the door. After awhile, I started to dread simply getting out of my car and each time I got shocked, it elicited an aggressive reaction from me (some not so nice words, kicking the door shut, etc...)!

So, why else do I think shock containment systems are a bad idea?

1) Your dog can associate the shock with whatever he is focusing on at the time it occurs, and, in turn, become fearful and/or aggressive toward that thing/ person/ dog/ etc. Given that the line is invisible and your dog never sees what is shocking him, your dog has no idea why his environment is suddenly causing him pain. This could cause some fallout. Whatever your dog was looking at at the time of the shock is what he could end up associating the pain with. So, where were YOU standing? Was there another dog in his line of vision? Were there any children passing by? How about the neighbor? If your dog starts to associate the pain with these things, how do you think his attitude toward you, the neighbor, children, other dogs, etc... might be affected?

Here's an example of a real story:

"A happy, gregarious dog, whom I will call "Jake", loved every person he saw. Jake's guardian was concerned about him leaving the yard because he frequently went to visit the neighbor. For what they believed was his protection, they installed an underground fence system that would shock Jake several feet before he was outside of his yard. They trained him to the system per the manufacturer's instructions. A few weeks after the system was installed Jake saw the neighbor out in her yard. Since Jake had always liked his neighbor he ran straight for her, focused on his human friend when ZAP! He felt a sharp stinging pain around his neck. This happened a few more times, the once friendly Jake always getting shocked as he ran towards someone he thought was his friend. Then one day the neighbor knocked on the front door. Jake saw the neighbor and he bit her in the leg, before she could cause him pain."

Another example came from a fellow trainer friend of mine. She was hired to work with a dog who not only was on an outside containment system, but, the family had installed one inside the house to keep the dog out of certain rooms. Of course, not knowing where the boundary lines were in the house, the trainer was moving about and working with the dog when the warning tone was set off. Up until then, the dog was happily working for the trainer, after that day, the dog refused to work for her and actually showed signs of fear whenever the trainer came around. And that dog wasn't even shocked, all he had to hear was the warning tone and it changed his mind about the trainer in one instant!

The representatives of these companies try to tell you that these systems are perfectly safe, that the types of things I've talked about so far can't possibly happen. But, even in their own white papers about the safety of these systems, they warn against using the fences on dogs with under-lying fear related issues. This is from Invisible Fence Company's white paper: **"Are Electronic Training Devices Right for Your Dog? Regardless of their previous attitudes toward electronic training devices, after considering the information presented in this paper, veterinarians should be confident that people and dogs in the following categories can benefit from the use of new, enhanced products for addressing a wide range of pet behavioral health and obedience training issues:"**

- *"Well-intentioned pet owners capable of following basic instructions for product use"*
- **"Non-aggressive, non-phobic dogs"**

You have to ask yourself...why can't aggressive or phobic dogs be put on one of these systems? Could it be because they know that these issues can be exacerbated by the same systems that they deem as perfectly safe? Maybe your dog will be fine on these systems, maybe he won't. Problem is, by the time you find out, it will be too late and you will spend a lot of money and a lot of time trying to fix the issues if they arise. Personally, in all my years

of training, I have yet to meet a dog contained by one of these systems that doesn't have some sort of fear or aggression issue. (*As a side note...when's the last time you read a white paper on the dangers and risks of a solid fence? They don't exist!*)

2) Your dog could find the experience of the invisible shock monster so upsetting, he could refuse to ever go outside again. This actually happened on an episode of Animal Planet's "It's Me or the Dog". The family on that episode had to spend weeks re-acclimating their dog to the yard and making her understand it was not a scary place to be.

3) An invisible fence system does nothing to keep out stray dogs or other animals or people that could potentially harm your dog. There have been stories of people removing the collar and stealing dogs from yards. Children that pass by are not always dog-friendly either. They can do such things as taunt your dog and throw rocks at him or run up and kick him or worse. And what about coyotes or other wildlife that pose a threat to your dog's safety?

4) If your dog ever does test the system and runs out of the boundaries, getting him to come back in with the collar still on will be a challenge. Often times, dogs will find something on the other side of the boundary is much more enticing than the motivation to avoid the shock and will run out of the yard to say, catch a bunny or chase a cat or get to another dog. Once he settles down and tries to come back into the yard, he may realize he is about to get shocked and not come back in at all. A couple years back, I actually picked up two dogs running down the street just moments after a near-miss with a speeding car and seconds before they ran onto a major interstate. When I got them into my car, they were both wearing their containment system collars and, thankfully, i.d. tags! When I called their owner, his mother answered the phone. When I told her I had just rescued the dogs off of the road, she yelled to her son... "The dogs are out AGAIN!" When the man picked up his dogs, he told me "Yeah, sometimes on nice days like this, they will see a squirrel or something and run away." These dogs were MILES from their home and on a very busy street!

5) Other sounds that elicit a "beep" or something similar to the warning tone on the collars could be associated with the impending shock as well. Things like cell phones, low-battery tones on a smoke detector, the hourly beep on a watch, could all bring about anxious feelings in your dog that he is about to be shocked. Now your dog won't know exactly where he is safe and where he isn't. Imagine being afraid of the one environment where you are supposed to feel the safest...your own home!

6) Weather can affect the function of the collar. From the Invisible Fence Company's website: "Snow piles from shoveling sidewalks or driveways may impact the performance of your Invisible Fence. To maintain optimal performance of your Invisible Fence, we recommend that you not pile the snow on your Invisible Fence boundary line. This can create an exit path for your dog if the snow is piled higher than your Invisible Fence signal field. In most cases your Invisible Fence® Brand system is set to activate at least six to eight feet from the line — both width and height. If the snow pile is higher than the signal field set, you may have to shovel off some of that snow to keep your dog Safe @ Home! "

I don't know about you, but we gets LOTS of snow. Feet!! I don't have the time nor the

patience to snow-blow or shovel all the way around my back yard. Do you?

I live down the street from a dog who is "contained" by one of these systems. I had the opportunity to talk to the owner one day about the system. He said "It works pretty good, the only time he gets out is when it's raining or when there is too much snow." Hmm.... my solid wood fence works great in the rain AND the snow! There have been many days when I was out walking my dogs that I spotted this particular dog running around in the woods near his house and guess what, it wasn't raining or snowing... hmmm...works really good...I don't know about you, but having my dogs get out on a regular basis does not constitute safe confinement in my book. It only takes one ill-timed car to come by and kill your dog if he is running down the street or one person to scare your dog when approaching him on the street to get bit and sue you.

7) **Passers-by do not know whether your dog will "respect" the boundary or not.** As a person that walks my dogs everyday, I can tell you from personal experience that not knowing whether or not another dog will stay in their yard as we pass can be worrisome to say the least. Are they going to come and attack my dogs? Will I have to try to get the dog back in their yard while trying to keep my dogs under control? Is the dog people-friendly? Sure, the companies tell you that they will give you signs to state that the dog is contained by their system, but knowing that dogs bolt through these fences all the time, this does not give me peace of mind. Also most people take these signs down after a period of time because they don't like the look and get sick of mowing around them. And what about the people who are afraid of dogs? I know bicyclists and joggers that carry pepper spray for just this purpose. Do you really want a trigger-happy, anxious person spraying that in your dogs eyes? And, let's not forget about the meter readers, mail carriers, and delivery trucks that have to pull up and wonder if your dog is going to run out at them or not. Some of those workers carry some pretty noxious stuff around to protect themselves as well. A former client of mine now has to pick up all of their packages at the post office because their dog, on a containment system, will no longer allow mail carriers and delivery trucks in the yard.

8) **The system requires batteries in the collar in order to function properly.** Let's face it, we don't always remember in our busy lives to change batteries in things, right? What happens if the batteries go dead and you don't realize? Your dog is no longer "safe". My solid, physical fence does NOT require batteries!

9) **Invisible Fence Company states that the reason they invented the system in the first place was because of all the dogs they saw wandering the streets.** Again, solid fences would greatly reduce those numbers!! They also state that dogs are relinquished to shelters everyday for behavioral problems caused by lack of exercise. I agree. However, I don't believe that a dog cannot get the exercise they need unless they are contained by one of these systems. They even claim that solid fences are restricting to dogs. I don't believe a solid fence takes up anymore room than your dog would have if you set boundaries in your yard with invisible wires. There are still places your dog can't go within these systems, so what's the difference? In fact, I was recently told by a potential client that her dog was on

a shock fence and if she throws his ball too close to the line, he won't get it. No dog I know that enjoys a good game of fetch would ever let a solid fence keep them from retrieving their ball within the yard. Dogs can get just as much exercise or more inside of a solidly fenced yard playing fetch with their owners or playing with another dog or by going for walks. Behavioral problems are also caused by lack of training! That's where people like me come in!!

- 10) **So, you can't put up a solid fence because of covenants in your subdivision?** Personally, I think this should be illegal! Until those laws are changed, though, here are some suggestions: Put your dog on a really long tie out on a harness (so he doesn't choke) when he has to go out and supervise him. Take your dog for walks/ runs on a leash. Find safe, fenced-in areas like dog parks or a friend's fenced-in yard to exercise your dog. Teach your dog a really great Recall (coming when called on cue). People in New York City walk their dogs several times a day because they don't have yards...surely, we can find ways to give our dogs the exercise they need without the promise of impending shock? In the mean time, work on your housing development to get the rules changed!!

These are the reasons I don't recommend nor would ever own an electronic containment system. For more information from other sources and also for scientific studies you can visit the following sites:

<http://www.joelwalton.com/shockcollars.html>

<http://greenacreskennel.com/>

<http://www.puppyplease.com/shockcollars.html>

<http://www.doggoneconnection.com/dgcarticles/shock-collars-signs.pdf>

<http://www.ust.is/media/ljosmyndir/dyralif/Trainingdogswithshockcollar.pdf>

<http://drpolsky.com/electronicfence.html>

<http://www.diamondsintheruff.com/TheProblemWithShock.pdf>

<http://www.dogbitelaw.com/PAGES/fence.htm>

<http://www.fortinlaw.com/Electronic%20Dog%20Fences.htm>

<http://petnewsandviews.com/2010/04/shock-collars-and-dogs/>

<http://www.kerryblues.info/WDJ/SHOCKING.HTML>

<http://www.dogstardaily.com/search/node/electronic+fences>