
OUTDOOR DOGS

Dogs are very special animals. While retaining some of their "wild nature," dogs have been domesticated to the point where they depend on humans for their survival and happiness. Most dogs receive enough food, water, and shelter to survive physically. But many dogs, especially large breeds, suffer mentally by being isolated in their family's backyard as "outdoor dogs."

Members of the family

People keep dogs in yards for many reasons. Some feel that dogs are still somehow wild and belong outdoors. Many actually believe that dogs prefer to live outdoors. Most, however, find that having a dog inside becomes inconvenient, perhaps due to shedding, behavior problems, or demands on their time. Whatever the reason, these dogs are relegated to the backyard while their owners still claim that they are members of the family. Few members of any family live even half their lives in a backyard.

How important is the companionship of a dog's human family? Dogs are descendants from wolves--extremely social animals who spend their entire lives as members of a cohesive pack. Dogs have been domesticated for 10,000 years, however, and they now depend on us to comprise their pack. Meeting a dog's social needs is as important to his health as are food and water. Nothing in a dog's collective genetic history has prepared him to live alone, even for relatively short periods. Put simply, lonely dogs suffer. And outdoor dogs are lonely most of their lives.

In addition to companionship, a dog's pack provides him with structure and order through its system of dominance hierarchy. A dog that has no guidance and no social structure, such as an outdoor dog, becomes undirected and misbehaved. Sufficient amounts of contact with his human pack provides the dog with the necessary security and order, two factors which are instrumental in developing a well-behaved, well-adjusted dog

The 9 to 5 dog

Obviously, many people who live with dogs are away from home several hours during the day (or night.) The reality for most dogs is that they must spend some time alone. In almost every case this "alone" time is better off spent indoors than outdoors. If outdoors, your dog is exposed to weather that can change quickly, even if shelter is available. Outdoor dogs are exposed to a variety of stimuli, such as other domestic and wild animals, loud unfamiliar noises, and people. All of these factors lead to the development of behaviors such as digging and barking. The dog is frustrated. He wants to investigate but can't, or he's scared and can't get away, or he's cold, or too hot. Even solid fences can't screen out all the threatening stimuli. And most dogs eventually find a reason, and a way, to get out of the yard, often ending up lost, injured or killed.

A house, on the other hand, keeps most, if not all, stimuli to a minimum. It also serves as an almost foolproof way to keep your dog from getting loose. If your dog does get scared, the house provides security because of its connotation as a safe "den." Plus, dogs that are indoors are living under "house rules," something you want to teach him anyway. Outdoor dogs live under yard rules. They can dig, bark, and eliminate whenever they feel like it. All these behaviors are undesirable. But this is what the outdoor dog is actually being taught, even if only in the yard during the day.

The role of the fence

Although the house should be your dog's living space, a fence does have its place. First, it allows your dog to play (for short periods), or to eliminate, alone. Without the fence, someone would have to

supervise the animal at all times. Secondly, it allows the dog to be out with the family without the worry of constant supervision or tethering. Tethering, in any form, is not an acceptable method of confinement. (See the handout, *Confinement of Dogs*)

Aggression

Dogs that live outdoors in a fenced yard or on a chain are likely to develop aggressive behavior, toward both humans and other animals. Their situation fosters this aggression. They are, in a sense, forced to defend their yard from all other creatures around them. The fence defines a territory that they staunchly defend. Chains have an added problem. When a dog feels threatened, it will either run or fight. When chained, a dog's only option is to fight. Over time, this aggressive reaction becomes an ingrained part of the dog's behavior.

Protection

Many people get "yard dogs" for protection. But unless your fenced yard completely surrounds your house, the dog is only protecting your lawn. If a burglar sees that your dog is in your yard, he knows the dog is not in your house. On the other hand, if he sees a dog in your house, he probably won't attempt to break in. Additionally, outdoor dogs tend to bark so much that no one pays attention to them after awhile, even if the reason is legitimate.

Exercise or stress release ?

Many people feel that leaving their dog in the yard allows the dog to get exercise. This is not as true as it seems. Most dogs, especially when no other dogs are with them, spend about 80% of their time alone sleeping or resting. The other 20% is spent waiting or barking. They also suffer from "barrier anxiety". This is caused by a fence that, as stated before, allows the dog to perceive stimuli without the opportunity to interact with it. The activity of running along the fence barking is a stress releaser for the dog who is experiencing "barrier anxiety. " This activity does not have the healthful benefits of exercise. Exercise comes from taking the dog for walks and playing with the dog.

Health and behavior

Outdoor dogs, almost without exception, are less healthy, and therefore more expensive to keep than indoor dogs. They are exposed to more diseases and accidents. Outdoor dogs, even dogs that spend only half a day outdoors, are learning the rules of the yard. These rules are that it is okay to bark at any time, to eliminate any time and anywhere, and to dig. None of these behaviors are compatible with living indoors. Also, because outdoor dogs are lonely and lacking companionship, they are often overly excited when they finally are given attention, so excited they can hardly be handled and appear misbehaved. This also leads some people to think that their outdoor dogs are happy, because they appear so whenever the owner is around. In fact, these moments may be the only happy ones for the dog.

If you raise a puppy indoors from the start, or provide training to a adult dog that has lived outdoors, they learn, after some mistakes, to behave inside. They learn "house rules." They can be trusted in a dog-proof house for an extended period alone. And dogs respond in direct proportion to your importance in their lives. If the only contact your dog has with you is seeing your hand sticking out of the doorway to tell it to stop barking, he's not very apt to listen to you. If however, you are always around watching and correcting his behavior, he is much more willing to listen.

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