

"I don't see what the problem is officer," the mother said. I followed the instructions to a tee. I put the collar around his neck snug. What choice did I have? He would never listen and would always just run off into the street. What if he was hit by a car? The company's website said it was only a "Gentle Static Correction" much like you get rubbing your feet on the carpet. I don't understand why everyone is so upset? You can't fault a mother for trying to keep her child safe.

E-collars used in invisible fence systems are being banned in countries around the world. Here in North

America the debate goes on. On the pro side it's about keeping a dog from running off the property and possibly being hit by a car or running away when a regular fence may not be a feasible option. The argument is that a dog given electric shocks is certainly better than a dead dog. The vendors claim it should not take many shocks for the dog to learn it's lesson and that the shock is just a gentle static correction. While I may agree that this type of E-collar fence set up may keep your dog within your yard, what is the trade off and how well do they work to keep them in?

INVISIBLE FENCES

MAY CAUSE **VISIBLE PROBLEMS**

ARE THEY WORTH IT?

THE THEORY

In training there are two main ways dogs learn: a dog will increase a behaviour to get something it wants, or decrease a behaviour to get away from something it does not want. It is this second part that an E-collar uses. This type of training is called positive punishment. I won't get technical, but basically when the dog is doing something we don't want, we introduce something the dog doesn't like. They learn that if they stop the behaviour, in this case leaving the property, the shock they want to get away from stops.

The invisible fence company's claim it is only a gentle static correction or pressure. If that was true would this really work? Think of a dog on a leash that chases a squirrel. The dog lunges at the squirrel and pulls quite hard on the leash to get to it. We have seen that even though the dog is getting choked he keeps pulling to get to that squirrel. In order to stop him pulling you will need something much more severe that counteracts the excitement he is feeling to get the squirrel. How severe is anyone's guess but the answer is severe enough to make the dog stop what they're doing? More severe than just choking as that did not stop your dog. That is how this training method works.

So, while the companies try to downplay the level of pain the dog is feeling, the truth is that for this to work it must be severe enough to counteract the excitement of the behaviour.

When it comes to pain threshold there are many studies showing an animal will get used to a certain level of pain



and in future will require a higher level to get the same results as before. So, where a certain correction may stop an animal the first time, as the animal gets used to it, they may require higher levels to stop the same unwanted behaviour. It's like us stepping into a bath of hot water. At first it is way too hot, so we can only put a toe in, but as we slowly get our bodies used to it we are eventually able deal with the heat.

The other challenge is knowing how much pain the dog is feeling when we apply shock. Dogs — and especially Labs — seem to have a high pain threshold. Our Labs are also known for hiding pain pretty well. So how would we know if we are hurting them? They tend not to tell us, but just deal with it.

UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

What you are trying to teach may not be all a dog learns. Dogs and people learn by association. Dogs pay attention to what things predict other things will happen. You getting out their leash predicts a walk. When they see you pick up the nail clippers they may retreat. They also develop emotional responses based on the cues you provide. You see this when you reach for your dog's food bowl and they get very excited. Conversely, when you grab the nail clippers they may move to the farthest part of the house from you.

Our dogs try and pair up what they do and what happens, which we call the "consequence." While we try and be quite clear, we never know if the dog will get what we are trying to show it.

Here is where an E-fence can have unintended consequences. Let's say a young child walks by each morning on the way to school. "Hey there's a kid," thinks your dog, as he runs over to greet the child. "Ouch, what was that?" he thinks as all of a sudden, he gets a jolt to his neck. After a few days he begins to associate the child with the shock as every time the child shows up so does the shock. Soon, knowing the child causes him pain he starts to bark at the child trying to tell him not to come this way. The child just keeps coming every day as he is just walking home from school. Eventually the dog begins to get aggressive toward the child associating them with the pain that happens each time the child appears. Now you have a dog that is aggressive and reactive to children. Even worse, the dog may associate the shock with just being outside. He notices when he is out he gets shocked but when in the house he does

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not. The dog then stops wanting to go out anymore. He may become fearful of being outdoors. Worse this can be irreversible. If we put a finger on a hot stove it usually takes only one time to teach us not to do that. If the dog makes the association that the shock was due to being outside, it may only take one occurrence of the shock for him to learn this for life. You see, they may not make

the association that we want, which is that a certain beep sound or boundary marker is why they are being shocked.

Research has indicated that dogs contained behind electric fences tend to become more reactive and, in some cases, more aggressive toward strangers and even family members because of anxiety and frustration. Recent studies show that dogs without previous aggressive problems are more prone to attack family members when the systems are activated.

MALFUNCTION

There are cases where the unit has malfunctioned. Some reported cases are where the unit's shut off stops and the dog just keeps getting shocked. Also, if the dogs fur is wet, the shock will be more intense then if dry. And if the batteries run low, it may stop working without you knowing it.

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EFFECTIVENESS

A survey by Dr. Nicole Starinksy¹ (Ohio State University) et al, asked 974 dog owners about how they kept their dogs confined to the yard, whether they had escaped – and whether they had ever bitten someone. The results showed that an electronic fence was the least effective method of containing a dog: 44% of dogs contained by one had escaped. Dogs were less likely to have escaped from a tether (27%) or from a see-through fence (e.g. chain link or slatted wood) (23%) or a privacy fence that is not see-through (also 23%). The method by which the dog was trained on the electronic fence had no effect on the rate of escape. 73% were trained by a trainer from the fencing company, 19% using the manual, and a handful by other trainers or not trained.

FEAR LEVELS

Studies have been done that measure a dog's cortisol levels to know how fearful a dog might be feeling and for how long. These studies show that dogs trained with E-collars show a higher level of fear than those trained with positive reinforcement methods. Their levels become elevated and can take a long time to return to normal. Even after 3 months between training sessions, dogs that had E-collar training showed raised cortisol levels just arriving at the training area even before any training occurred.

WHY I SAY NO TO E-COLLARS


A study by Schilder and van der Borg² on shock collars concluded that shocks received during training are not only unpleasant but also painful and frightening. The shocked dog showed more stress not only in the area they were shocked but in other places like the park. They also seem to associate the shock event with their handler being present. Other studies showed that some dogs after being shocked and not making the connection why it was happening would just lie down and exhibit learned helplessness. Basically, they became so fearful that they just gave up, and even after the collar came off they never would try again.

I refer to my dogs as "Companion Animals." They have feelings and thoughts. While I get that an invisible fence may allow a dog to run on a big property unattended, the fact is that the downsides are many. Probably the biggest thing for me is "Trust." I have taught my animals how to communicate with me. I have taught them that I will keep them safe and respect they have feelings including fear. When we betray our companion's trust and take advantage of their innocence, our actions are ethically indefensible.

It's one thing if there were no better options, but there are. When I was growing up our school system used to bring you down to the office and then either spank you with a strap or hit your hands with a stick if you misbehaved. "Spare the rod, spoil the child," the saying went. Years ago, this was considered good behaviour training for kids. Now we know much different. Behavioural science has shown the same things with animals. In the end I choose to use training methods that are humane and subject my companion animals to as little stress, pain and fear as possible. Many countries have enacted laws

to protect animals. While our governments have not outlawed E-collars, I for one have. They are in the same trash bin as choke chains and prong collars. Yes, they all may work but I'd rather use other things that work and develop trust between me and my companion animals. E-collars are both unnecessary and detrimental to our dog's welfare and mental state of mind. While I know my dog will feel pain and fear during their lifetime, the last thing I want is for me to be the cause of it.

~Stuart Hoffman,
Lab Rescue Volunteer and Trainer



"When we *betray* our companion's *trust* and take advantage of their innocence, our actions are *ethically indefensible*."

¹Starinsky, N. S., Lord, L. K., & Herron, M. E. (2017). Escape rates and biting histories of dogs confined to their owner's property through the use of various containment methods. *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association*, 250(3), 297-302

²Schilder, Matthijs B.H., van der Borg, Joanne A.M. (2004). Training dogs with help of the shock collar: short and long term behaviour effects. *Applied Animal Behaviour Science*, 85 (3-4), 319-334

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Graphic Design and Layout: Sheri Manuel