

The Canine Escape Artist

Escaping is a serious problem for both you and your dog, as it could have tragic consequences. If your dog is running loose, he is in danger of being hit by a car, being injured in a fight with another dog, or being hurt in a number of other ways. Additionally, you're liable for any damage or injury your dog may cause and you may be required to pay a fine if he's picked up by an animal control agency. In order to resolve an escaping problem, you must determine not only how your dog is getting out, but also why he is escaping.

Why Dogs Escape

Social Isolation/Frustration

Your dog may be escaping because he's bored and lonely if:

- He is left alone for long periods of time without opportunities for interaction with you.
- His environment is relatively barren, without playmates or toys.
- He is a puppy or adolescent (under three years old) and doesn't have other outlets for his energy.
- He is a particularly active type of dog (like the herding or sporting breeds) who needs an active job in order to be happy.
- The place he goes to when he escapes provides him with interaction and fun things to do. For example, he goes to play with a neighbor's dog or to the local school yard to play with the children.

Recommendations:

We recommend expanding your dog's world and increasing his "people time" in the following ways:

- Walk your dog daily. It's good exercise, both mentally and physically.
- Teach your dog to fetch a ball or Frisbee and practice with him as often as possible.
- Teach your dog a few commands and/or tricks. Practice these commands and/or tricks every day for five to ten minutes.
- Take an obedience class with your dog and practice daily what you've learned.
- Provide interesting toys (Kong-type toys filled with treats or busy-box toys) to keep your dog busy when you're not home.
- Rotate your dog's toys to make them seem new and interesting.
- Keep your dog inside when you're unable to supervise him.
- If you have to be away from home for extended periods of time, take your dog to work with you or to a "doggie day care," or ask a friend or neighbor to walk your dog.

Sexual Roaming

Dogs become sexually mature at around six months of age. An intact male dog is motivated by a strong, natural drive to seek out female dogs. It can be very difficult to prevent an intact dog from escaping, because his motivation to do so is very high.

Recommendations:

- Have your male dog neutered. Studies show that neutering will decrease sexual roaming in about 90% of the cases. If, however, an intact male has established a pattern of escaping, he may continue to do so even after he's neutered, so it's important to have him neutered as soon as possible.
- Have your female dog spayed. If your intact female dog escapes your yard while she's in heat, she'll probably get pregnant. Millions of unwanted pets are euthanized every year. Please don't contribute to the pet overpopulation problem by allowing your female dog to breed indiscriminately.

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Fears and Phobias

Your dog may be escaping in response to something he is afraid of if he escapes when he is exposed to loud noises, such as thunderstorms, firecrackers or construction sounds.

Recommendations:

- Identify what is frightening your dog and desensitize him to it (see our handout: "Helping Your Dog Overcome the Fear of Thunder and Other Startling Noises"). You may need professional help with the desensitization process. Check with your veterinarian about giving your dog an anti-anxiety medication while you work on behavior modification.
- Leave your dog indoors when he is likely to encounter the fear stimulus. Mute noise by leaving him in a basement or windowless bathroom and leave on a television, radio or loud fan.
- Provide a "safe place" for your dog. Observe where he likes to go when he feels anxious, then allow access to that space, or create a similar space for him to use when the fear stimulus is present.

Separation Anxiety

Your dog may be escaping due to separation anxiety if:

- He escapes as soon as, or shortly after, you leave.
- He displays other behaviors that reflect a strong attachment to you, such as following you around, frantic greetings or reacting anxiously to your preparations to leave.
- He remains near your home after he's escaped.
- Factors that can precipitate a separation anxiety problem:
 - There has recently been a change in your family's schedule that has resulted in your dog being left alone more often.
 - Your family has recently moved to a new house.
 - There's been a death or loss of a family member or another family pet.
 - Your dog has recently spent time at an animal shelter or boarding kennel.

Recommendations:

Separation anxiety can be resolved using counter-conditioning and desensitization techniques (see our handout: "Separation Anxiety").

How Dogs Escape

Some dogs jump fences, but most actually climb them, using some part of the fence to push off from. A dog may also dig under the fence, chew through the fence, learn to open a gate or use any combination of these methods to get out of the yard. Knowing how your dog gets out will help you to modify your yard. However, until you know why your dog wants to escape, and you can decrease his motivation for doing so, you won't be able to successfully resolve the problem.

Recommendations for Preventing Escape

For climbing/jumping dogs: Add an extension to your fence that tilts in toward the yard. The extension doesn't necessarily need to make the fence much higher, as long as it tilts inward at about a 45-degree angle.

For digging dogs: Bury chicken wire at the base of your fence (with the sharp edges rolled inward), place large rocks at the base, or lay chain-link fencing on the ground.

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Punishment

- Never punish your dog after he's already out of the yard. Dogs associate punishment with what they're doing at the time they're punished. Punishing your dog after the fact won't eliminate the escaping behavior, but will only make him afraid to come to you.
- Never punish your dog if the escaping is a fear-related problem or is due to separation anxiety. Punishing fear-motivated behaviors will only make your dog more afraid, and thus make the problem worse.
- Punishment is only effective if administered at the moment your dog is escaping and if he doesn't associate the correction with you. If you can squirt him with a hose or make a loud noise as he is going over, under or through the fence, it might be unpleasant enough that he won't want to do it again. However, if he realizes that you made the noise or squirted the water, he'll simply refrain from escaping when you're around. This type of correction is difficult to administer effectively, and won't resolve the problem if used by itself. You must also give your dog less reason to escape and make it more difficult to do.
- Chaining your dog should only be used as a last resort, and then only as a temporary measure until a more permanent solution can be found. Chaining your dog doesn't give him sufficient opportunity for exercise and can be dangerous if done improperly (see our handout: "Keeping Your Dog Confined To your Property").

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