



Outside dogs... Ask a trainer

By Nan Arthur, CDBC, CPDT, KPA CTP

Dear Trainer,

A dear friend of mine wants to indulge her 13-year-old son with a dog that he has begged for every year as his birthday present. There are several other younger kids in the family so my friend thinks they will all benefit from the experience of having a dog. The real problem is that the dog will have to remain outside for his or her entire life as my friend's husband has reluctantly agreed to a dog, but only under those conditions. They are now looking for a puppy, which I think would be even worse. Can you give me some ammunition to take to my friend about what a bad decision this would be for a dog or a puppy?

Signed,

Outside the Boundaries in San Diego

Dear Outside,

This is a great topic and one that has not been addressed well in the past, so thank you for bringing it up.

Of course, I'm sure you have guessed that I'm not in favor of dogs living 24 hours a day outside. I'm also concerned that the husband "reluctantly" agreed to this arrangement. Dogs are companion animals and should be considered part of the family, not a compromise.

Do dogs live outside all over the world? Of course they do. Are they all that they can be, healthy and happy? We can't know for sure, but we can look at behaviors and problems associated with dogs that live outside and draw from that knowledge.

Let's look at the different levels of dogs that live outside, the quality of life and the problems that can arise from living independently from humans.

Street Dogs

If you have ever been to an area or country where dogs live on their own around towns and cities, you will have seen dogs in many levels of despair. These are mostly considered feral dogs, but are still domesticated. The majorities of these street dogs live shortened lives and exist in different stages of unhealthy--both mentally and physically. Fear and aggression are common and disease, parasites, cars and even humans claim many lives at early ages. Not much of a life for an animal that is called, "Man's best friend."

Farm Dogs



Many people that live on farms and ranches have dogs that live outside day and night, and I have heard reports that their dogs prefer to be outside “where all the action is.” This can be a problem if a dog prefers “the action” above the humans in his life. Dogs of this nature may or may not be friendly, but they can be very independent and as such may resist coming when called, or simple things like being restrained for important handling such as medical care.

Urban and Suburban Dogs

Dogs that live in cities and suburbs in yards are forced to tolerate a myriad of stimulating activities both day and night. These dogs often deal with things such as scary noises, people or children teasing them, boredom, loneliness, weather conditions and more.

With urban settings also comes much busier people that have less time to spend with a dog living in a yard, and with that comes many annoying, if not dangerous behaviors.

Among some of the more common annoying behavior problems are:

- Escaping
- Barking
- Digging
- Marking
- Mounting people
- Fence fighting

There is also the potential for aggression with dogs in yards. Many dogs are used as guard dogs to protect the property, and as such become more of a risk for bites. Dogs in yards also have more potential to protect their area, even from friends and family.

In the book Fatal Dog Attacks, by Karen Delise, she identified attacks that ended in death at over 75% on the property of the owners, and 50% of those were dogs either chained in the yard, or roaming free in the yard. Supporting those findings, the National Canine Research Council has also published more information on the subject. They pointed to the “Function of the Dog” as one of the biggest contributing factors to canine aggression, categorizing this problem as, “Owners maintaining dogs for guarding/protection, fighting, intimidation/status, or as yard dogs. Such dogs are resident dogs, not family pets.” From 2001-2007, 91% of all fatal attacks were due to one or more of the following: Owner management and control of the dog, function of the dog, and reproduction status.

If protection is the reason for a yard dog, the question would be, “Just what would the dog be protecting?” The lawn? A dog living in the yard can’t stop someone with ill intentions from entering the house. The dog also won’t know who are the good guys or the bad guys and may bite someone like a fireman that is trying to help.



Puppies that are made to be outside dogs will not have the socialization and care that stable adult dogs need to be safe in the community. As they mature to adolescents, these same dogs are learning about setting their own rules, and often become overly excited when people do visit. Jumping on people, biting and out of control behaviors have been reported by owners of yard dogs. This is partially due to the fact that yard dogs are in a constant state of alertness and because they don't rest and sleep as much as needed, they become less stable in general.

What is a Home?

Dogs need more than shelter; they need a home where there is social interaction that dogs have evolved to expect from humans. Children that have the privilege of having a dog in their life should come away with an education about kindness, benevolence and the responsibly of caring for another being. Dogs that are left in yards are often forgotten as children mature along with their social lives. Because dogs have become domesticated toward us humans, and are extremely social animals, it is a sad state when a dog's existence becomes one of isolation.

The point of sharing one's life with a dog should be for companionship. Relegating a dog to a yard is the antithesis of companionship, and as stated, can have many problematic behaviors and legal complications connected to such an arrangement.

Finally, here is something to ask your friend to think about. If the child wishing for a dog were disabled and in need of an assistance dog to help him function and enrich his life, would the dog being inside the home be an issue? Any dog can be trained to have good manners, and the benefits of having a dog as part of the family is one of the most enriching experiences children can learn, and as such is the best kind of assistance dog.

I hope this gives you enough information to take to your friend.

Good luck,
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