The Canine Escape Artist

DOES YOUR DOG'S ability to escape from the back yard have you convinced that he's nothing less than a "Hairy Houdini"? Your never-ending attempts to keep your pet confined to your yard may seem comical at times, but every escape opens up the possibility of tragic consequences. If your dog is running loose, he's in danger of being hit by a car, injured in a fight with another dog, or hurt in any number of other ways. You're also 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. To prevent escapes, you'll need to find out how your dog is getting out of the yard and, more importantly, why he's so determined to get out.

Why Dogs Escape

Social Isolation/Frustration

Your dog may be escaping because he's bored and lonely, especially 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.
- He visits places after each escape that provide him with interaction and fun things to do. For example, he may go play with a neighbor's dog or visit 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 (for both of you).
- Teach your dog to fetch a ball or Frisbee® and practice with him as often as possible.
- Teach your dog a few commands or tricks. Try to hold a lesson every day for five to 10 minutes.
- Take an obedience class with your dog and practice what you've learned every day.

- 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. (This will also keep him safe and prevent any possibility of his being stolen from your yard.)
- If you must be away from home for extended periods of time, take your dog to work with you or to a "doggie day care center," or ask a friend or neighbor to walk your dog.

Sexual Roaming

Dogs become sexually mature at around six months of age. Like a teenager first feeling the surge of hormones, an intact male dog has a strong, natural drive to seek out females. As you can imagine, it can be difficult to prevent an intact dog from escaping when 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 percent of cases. If an intact male has established a pattern of escaping, he may continue to do so even after he's neutered, which is even more reason 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 (and she could be impregnated even if she stays

in your yard). 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.

Fears and Phobias

Your dog may be escaping out of fear, especially if he's exposed to loud noises, such as thunderstorms, firecrackers, or construction sounds.

Recommendations

Identify what is frightening your dog and desensitize him to it. You may need to seek out the help of a professional trainer, or talk to your veterinarian about anti-anxiety medications that might help your dog while you work on behavior modification.

Keep your dog indoors if there's any chance he may encounter the fear stimulus outside. You can even mute outside noises by creating a comfortable spot in a basement or windowless bathroom and turning 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 trying to escape 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, greeting you wildly, 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

- Your family's schedule has changed, and that has resulted in your dog being left alone more often.
- Your family has recently moved to a new house.
- Your family has experienced the 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

Assuming your dog has been correctly diagnosed as suffering from separation anxiety, the problem can be resolved using counterconditioning and desensitization techniques.

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. But until you know why your dog wants to escape and you can decrease his motivation for doing so, the recommendations below won't be nearly as effective.

Recommendations for Preventing Escape

For climbing/jumping dogs: Add an extension to your fence. It's not so important that the extension make the fence much higher, as long as it tilts inward at about a 45-degree angle. Be certain there are no structures placed near the fence, such as a table or chair or dog house, that your dog could use as a springboard to jump over the fence.

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.

Never chain or otherwise tether your dog to a stationary object as a means of keeping him confined. Tethering is not only cruel, but it also leads to aggressive behavior in dogs.

Using Correction

Never correct your dog after he's already left 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 probably make him afraid to come to you.

Never correct your dog if the escaping is related to fear or is due to separation anxiety. Punishing a fearful response will only make your dog more afraid and make the problem worse. In addition, avoid inadvertently reinforcing a fearful behavior— such as by petting a frightened dog and saying, "It's okay."

Only correct your dog if you can administer correction at the moment your dog is escaping and only 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. If he realizes that you made the noise or squirted the water, however, 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 for him to do so. Ultimately, that is how you'll put a permanent stop to that "Hairy Houdini" act.

This information provided for you by

PEGGY ADAMS ANIMAL RESCUE LEAGUE
1925
HUMANE SOCIETY OF THE PALM BEACHES

Hill's
SCIENCE DIET
VETERINARIAN RECOMMENDED

Promoting the Protection of All Animals

THE HUMANE SOCIETY OF THE UNITED STATES
2100 L Street, NW, Washington, DC 20037
202-452-1100 ▪ www.hsus.org