

## Invisible Fences: Not a Recommended Solution

Christine Hibbard, CTC, CPDT



I've been wanting to write an article about "invisible" fences, aka electric fences for some time. I was spurred to action after reading an article by an esteemed colleague, Laurie Luck at [Smart Dog University](#). She got herself and her dogs home safely after one of her neighbor's dogs broke through the invisible fence but it was a scary experience. I've experienced this frightening situation myself with my own dogs and client dogs when out on walks. I wrote an article titled [Protecting Your Dog on Walks](#) where I made many suggestions for protecting your dog from people and other dogs that are off leash to help you if you ever find yourself in this situation.

If invisible fences are such a wonderful invention, why are off leash dogs breaking through the border towards those of us walking our dogs on leash? When I ask clients why they've installed an invisible fence, the two most popular answers are: the prohibitively high cost of solid fencing and neighborhood covenants that prohibit solid fencing. I thought I'd take this opportunity to go through the justifications I hear from people for using these things and why invisible fences are often not a good idea for dogs or people.

**"I know the collar shocks my dog but it doesn't hurt".**

Since we specialize in animal behavior at [Companion Animal Solutions](#), let's start with the obvious problem with these fences, they shock dogs. These shocks can range from mild to intense shocks depending on how the collar is set, the quality of the collar and whether the collar malfunctions (you don't want to hear the stories I've collected from clients and other trainers about these collars malfunctioning and shocking the dog continuously until the owner got home or noticed). Now, some dogs seem to be able to "take a licking and keep on ticking". These dogs handle being shocked with little behavioral fallout (increased anxiety, fear and aggression). Other dogs, not so much. While breed plays a part in determining how well a dog handles aversives or physical punishment, we know from experience that we have to consider the individual dog in front of us, not just the breed. If your dog already tends to be barky and anxious, this is probably not a good tool for you to buy.

**"The company sent a trainer to teach my dog where the borders are."**



The question is how quickly and how well your dog learned where the borders are. The quality of “dog training” by these invisible fence companies varies widely. If you decide to buy one of these things, ask the company about the qualifications of the person who will be teaching your dog. At the bare minimum, you want the trainer to be a [Certified Professional Dog Trainer](#). Before you purchase the fence, ask the trainer for references and ask them to explain to you in detail how they’re going to train your dog. If you don’t like the trainer the fence company uses, require them to pay for an outside trainer.

**“But my dog has learned where the borders are and doesn’t cross them.”**

Some dogs respect the boundary unequivocally while others, not so much. Some may respect the boundary sometimes but eventually something so enticing will come along (a dog in heat, a neighbor cat, a deer) that your dog will be willing to suffer the shock to get to what they want. Once your dog has gotten off your property and caused trouble or has just gotten bored with what they wanted, why would they come back to their own yard? They’ll get shocked again coming home. Yuck. Once a dog knows they can break through the border, they’ll be much more likely to do it again if bored or aroused enough.

**“My dog is fine with other dogs, kids, etc. so if they leave the property, I’m not too worried about it.”**



An invisible fence may keep your dog on your own property but it doesn’t stop other dogs, kids or people from coming ON to your property. These fences offer your dog less than zero protection. Are you sure neighborhood kids aren’t taunting your dog or worse? We had a rash of dog thefts last year in our area. Seems drug addicts were stealing dogs and then ransoming them back to their owners after they were “found”. We also have coyotes roaming our city neighborhoods (not the suburbs, the city) from which your dogs and cats will not be protected.

If you still feel like you “have to” use this type of fence, you’ve decide to use this type of fence regardless or are still considering whether to purchase one, we recommend the following:

- NEVER leave your dog unattended when outside.
- Always keep the collar on your dog and the batteries in the collar charged. (The dog really does know when they’re wearing the collar and when they’re not. Trainers call it “collar wise”).
- Don’t allow your dog to bark relentlessly at passersby. At best this is annoying and at worst, frightening for people walking by your house. It’s also behaviorally unhealthy for your dog. Ask your dog trainer about barrier frustration (or post a question to this article).

As always, we want to know what our readers think. What are your experiences with these fences?

NOTE: Since writing this article, I found an article by Steve Benjamin detailing a technique for teaching your dog [boundary training](#). I thought our readers might find it useful.