

The Visible Dangers of Invisible Fencing!

By Kim MacMillan



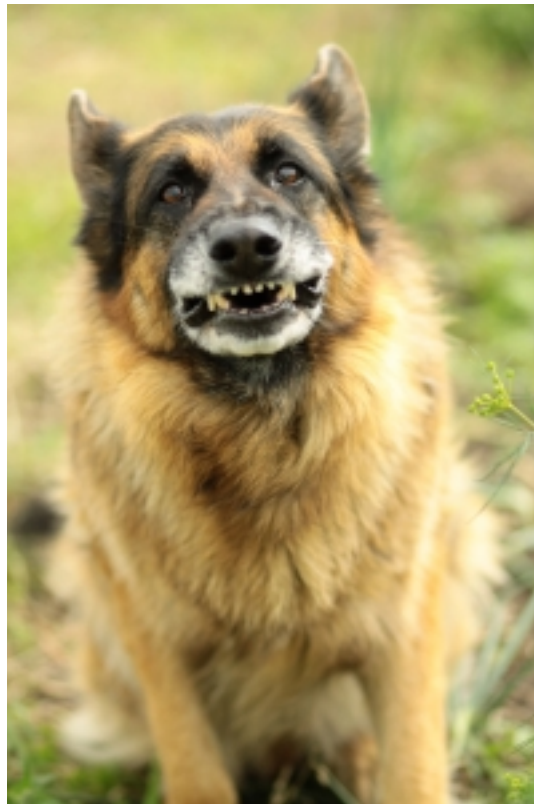
Normally I do my best to refrain from dwelling on "non-positive" training methods or containment systems, however lately approximately one in ten clients are asking whether underground fencing might be right for their dog.

My simple answer is: underground shock fencing is not suitable for ANY dog. Here's why.

I'll be honest - There is a lot of misinformation out there about safety of this type of containment system, from both extremes - scare tactics that many people would never believe (even though there's likely a grain of truth to it!), to the other extreme where it is portrayed as entirely risk-free. So, what are the facts?

1. Underground fencing relies on positive punishment in order to work. In laymen's terms - this means that your dog needs to experience pain - even if momentary - via a shock, in order to learn. With repeated experiences of momentary pain (the shock when the dog goes too far, and eventually the warning beep takes on that role), the dog begins to be cautious and leery when going near those areas. The experiences of pain become a minor (or major, for some dogs) fear.

A big problem with the use of positive punishment is that sometimes the dog learns things that were unintended. I have seen numerous cases where normal dogs have become very fearful of, frustrated with, and even aggressive towards, strangers within a few months of using an underground fencing system. The reason for this is that the dog - a friendly, social being - sees people walking by and desperately wants to say hi. Even though the dog has experienced the shock before, in his excitement to greet the passerby, he continues forward and just as he's about to reach the person, he receives a shock. This startles him. It happens the next time, and once more. The fourth time, the dog sees the person and instead of running to say hello, the dog hangs back, or even barks and lunges. Why has this happened? The dog repeatedly experienced a shock as they were going to approach a stranger. Instead of understanding that it's the same shock as before, the dog begins to believe that the people were the source of that momentary pain. Voila. A fear is born.



This doesn't just happen with people, but it can happen with dogs, strollers, garbage bins, and other inanimate objects as well. It just depends whether or not the dog has made multiple pairings with a repeated stimulus to make the association.

2. Dogs can become fearful and anxious about leaving the property. Many people who use these fences still like to take their dogs for drives and walks, but find that after beginning to use the fence system, the dog becomes hesitant to leave the yard, even on a leash. After all, the dog has been made to learn in the past that going over the boundary was a painful experience, and it's hard for them sometimes to understand that when the collar is not on, they can go through. In a few rare extreme cases, dogs have become frightened of going into the yard all together, even to eliminate.

I personally know a dog who became very fearful of getting into vehicles. The owner couldn't understand why, but after a few months realized that they kept forgetting to take the collar off the dog in the vehicle, and the dog faced a shock every single time it left the property in the vehicle. The poor dog! The dog was able to overcome this with a lot of work, but it was a very stressful time for the dog.

3. It only works....until it doesn't. Many people falsely believe that it will keep their highly prey-driven or highly social dog in the yard forever. I can't tell you how many dogs I've come across wandering around the neighbourhood with an underground shock fence collar on. Clearly it didn't work for those dogs. Many dogs will go years without a problem, until that trigger happens - a fox, a cat, a child on a bike, thunder, a gunshot, a female in heat - causes that dog to leave its property. And once your dog goes through it once - by golly you might as well go buy a real leash or fence because that dog WILL go through it again.

Also, keep in mind there may be a trigger strong enough to make the dog go through the fence, but that doesn't mean that when the excitement is over, the dog will bear a second shock to come back in. Some of the commercial systems you buy will shock the dogs each way. I have yet to see a dog who will happily take a second shock to come back INTO the property.

Another common complaint I hear is that "my last dog never had an issue, so why does this one?". Generally my honest answer is "Because you were simply lucky before."

4. It doesn't protect your dog from the environment! Even if it -does- work to keep your dog in the yard (at

least, most of the time...), it does NOT work to keep others OUT of your yard! Stray dogs and wildlife can still come on to your property and hurt your dog. Children may tease your dog, knowing that the fence keeps the dog a few feet away. It sounds harsh, but children can be quite cruel, especially when unsupervised by adults! Even kind children can unknowingly tease a dog into frustration or anxiety.

5. Many people use shock fencing as a replacement for exercising their dog. It's not uncommon for me to hear that "we got the fence to give Fido more room to run, and so he could play outdoors." When I ask, however, what their dog tends to do when they let the dog out, most often the response is napping, lying by the door, or barking to get back in! Not quite what they had planned!



Then there is the other category of dog, who IS busy, curious, and active, and who will find things to do - they become self-employed, if you will. They dig up gardens, bark at the neighbours, chew on your deck, and still come inside at night wired. It's a real fact that many dogs are grossly underexercised, and it's also a real fact that dogs rarely self-exercise, in the sense that they get their heart rate up and are left satisfied. For some owners, it replaces off-site walks altogether and the dog quickly becomes territorial and undersocialized to the normal everyday goings on of human society.

Dogs need to be actively exercised - as in, interactive activities between you AND your dog or your dog with other dogs. Dogs generally are poor self-exercisers in a yard (although they become GREAT self-exercisers when they are triggered to leave the yard and not come back!).

6. This is purely anecdotal data, but in my case work often when a client is using, or has used, invisible shock fencing, the clients have called me because: their dog is barking a lot more, the dog becomes more reactive, the dog has become "suddenly" fearful, the dog escapes the yard, the dog won't come when called, the dog charges the fence line, door darting and escape attempts when the collar is not on, the dog has started exhibiting general anxiety issues - licking itself, pacing, self-mutilation behaviors, or the dog has started eliminating indoors. One or two cases don't make a truth, for sure, but over time I've seen a clear pattern develop between invisible fencing and those client complaints. Enough that my first recommendation is -always- to remove the invisible fence collar.

7. Not addressing your dog specifically, but dogs contained in invisible shock systems can really frighten passersby. I know myself if I am walking and I see a loose dog in a yard, I am very alert until I have passed that yard, especially because you can't always tell if the dog is wearing a collar or not. Children have been very startled when dogs have charged them, stopping only a couple of feet away barking. If I am walking somewhere where there is a dog on an invisible fence collar, I will do my best to avoid walking by there with my dogs in the future.

8. Lastly, from a purely cognitive standpoint - we're putting an awful lot of pressure on our dogs to understand the concept of an "invisible" boundary. For those who use flag markers forever, the dog will at least have a visual aid to learn from. But traditionally the flags, if they are used at all, are used only for a short time, and then the dog is expected to be able to "visualize" an invisible boundary forevermore. Not to mention, some of the systems that you buy off of the shelf at the pet store are wireless and use a

circular pattern of fencing based on frequencies. Talk about expecting a lot of our dogs! Many dogs never truly learn a "boundary" with the fencing systems, as they are unable to comprehend, intellectually, the concept of an invisible cut-off. This lack of understanding (or superstitious learning) can definitely result in some of the problems above. Livestock are contained within hot-wiring or shock systems, but at least they quickly learn with help from a visual aid, so that they are able to make a quick cause and effect association.

The day I saw a dog, on one of the circular wireless systems, running with visiting dog, having a great time until it heard the warning beep, at which point it stopped mid-stride, froze, and began looking around nervously to decide which direction to move so as to avoid an incoming shock, was one more nail in the coffin for me. That dog, once it DID successfully make it back to the house without a shock, laid down by the door and was no longer interested in playing with anyone. I don't know about you, but that dog didn't seem to be any longer "enjoying" the freedom that the fencing system was meant to provide.

Now, I know before some of you even get halfway through this, some will be shouting (and emailing) that "my dog has been using it for ____ years" or "I've used it on all of my dogs", often followed up with "never had a problem". Of course there will be some dogs that it works for (at least, most of the time....), or else these products wouldn't be selling. However, you don't have to go far to find someone whose dog escaped it, and may have been fine, or sadly may have been killed or never found again. Or whose dog developed "sudden" fears within a short time of beginning use of the fence.

The reality of the situation is this - yes, some dogs will never have a negative reaction to the shock fencing. That is the way of behavioral diversity. But - some will, and some will develop very serious problems as a result.

The problem is: You don't know until you use it. And once you use it, you can't undo whatever may come afterwards.

My question is: Are you willing to take that chance with your dog's wellbeing and safety?

I'm not.

If, after reading and understanding the risks that are quite possible for your dog to experience, you still decide to go ahead with the fence system, I can only wish that your dog IS one of the "lucky ones", and that you will accept whatever changes you dog's behaviour and personality may face if it doesn't go as planned.

Visible, physical containment will ALWAYS be the safest option. Although there are possibilities of failure for all containment systems of some sort, none face the same level and diversity of challenges as those that can occur with invisible shock fence systems.