

The Canine Escape Artist

Escaping is a serious problem for both you and your dog, as it can 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 are liable for any damage or injury your dog may cause and you may be required to pay a fine if he is 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 is bored or 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 does not 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 schoolyard 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 is good exercise 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 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 have learned.
- ↳ Provide interesting toys to keep your dog busy when you are not home. You can also rotate the toys to keep them interesting (see our handout: "Dog Toys and How to Use Them").
- ↳ Keep your dog inside when you are unable to supervise him.
- ↳ If you work very long days, take your dog 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 dog is motivated by a strong, natural drive to seek out a mate. It can be very difficult to prevent an intact dog from escaping, because their 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 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 is important to have him neutered as soon as possible.
- ↳ Have your female dog spayed. If your intact female dog escapes your yard while she is in heat, she'll probably get pregnant. Millions of unwanted pets are euthanized every year. Please do not contribute to the pet overpopulation problem by allowing your female dog to breed indiscriminately.

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:

- Û 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”). Check with your veterinarian about giving your dog an anti-anxiety medication while you work on behavior modification.
- Û 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.
- Û 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:

- Û He escapes as soon as, or shortly after, you leave.
- Û 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.
- Û He remains near your home after he has escaped.

Factors that can precipitate a separation anxiety problem:

- Û There has been a change in your family’s schedule that has resulted in your dog being left alone more often.
- Û Your family has moved to a new house.
- Û There’s been a death or loss of a family member or another family pet.
- Û 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 will not 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 does not 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.

Punishment

- Û Never punish your dog after he is already out of the yard. Dogs associate punishment with what they are doing at the time they are punished. Punishing your dog after the fact will not eliminate the escaping behavior, but will only make him afraid to come to you.
- Û 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.
- Û 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 does not give him sufficient opportunity for exercise and can be dangerous if done improperly (see our handout: “Keeping Your Dog Confined to your Property”).