



Escape Artists

Do you have a dog you can't seem to keep at home, who scales your fence or takes every opportunity to run off? If you have a canine escape artist, you have a problem you need to fix: there are risks to your dog, to other people, and to your pocketbook to consider. A dog running loose is likely to be injured or picked up by animal control, and you, as the owner, are liable for any damage your dog might do, to property or to people or other animals.

Why Does Your Dog Want to Escape?

If you can figure this out, you'll have much better luck keeping your dog at home.

Boredom or social isolation can cause your dog to seek entertainment or companionship elsewhere. There are several ways to make the situation better for your dog.

- ◆ The best place for your dog to be when you're not outside with them to supervise is indoors, where you can keep them safely confined with toys to entertain them when you're gone. See "Dog Toys and How to Use Them."
- ◆ Make sure your dog gets plenty of companionship. Your dog needs to feel like a part of the family. (See "Inside or Outside Dog?")
- ◆ Make sure your dog gets enough exercise; you should get your dog tired out every day. Time that your dog spends alone in the yard doesn't count toward that exercise. Most dogs need interaction with their people for that.

Sexually motivated roaming is mainly an issue for unneutered male dogs, but it's a problem for owners of unspayed females as well. A male dog looking for available females is very hard to keep in, and if your female wanders while she's in heat, she's nearly sure to get pregnant. Pet overpopulation is a serious issue, and accidental breeding is a big part of it.

If you get your dog neutered when they're young, you may avoid this issue entirely. If they've established the pattern of escaping over a long period, it may take longer for them to stop, but getting them neutered will make changing this behavior much easier. See the Sacramento SPCA Web site for low-cost spay and neuter options.

Dogs with fears and phobias, such as thunderstorm or noise phobias, often react by escaping. See "Dogs Who Fear Thunder, Fireworks, and Other Loud Noises." Keep your dog safe by putting them somewhere they can't escape and where they feel safe when you know they may be frightened.

Separation anxiety can cause your dog to try to get out. See "Separation Anxiety."

Keeping Your Dog Safely at Home

To keep your dog in, you'll need to figure out how they're getting out. While you work to make them want to get out less, you also need to block their escape routes.

No matter what method you use, always make sure your dog has access to shelter and fresh water while outdoors.

Fences

If your dog jumps the fence, you can make it higher. The best way to do that is with an extension that slants inward at about a 45-degree angle.

A lot of dogs get over fences by climbing, pushing off something on or near the fence, or by hitching themselves over with their paws. Make sure there's nothing your dog can use to get over in these ways. A rolling bar at the top of the fence can be helpful.

For a dog who digs under the fence, you can make digging difficult or impossible by securing chicken wire or chain link fencing on the ground or burying it along the base of the fence, or by placing large rocks or bricks there.

Replace or secure any latches or locks that your dog has figured out how to open.

Sometimes the only way to prevent fence escapes is to provide a secure, covered dog run for the times you're not at home.

Tethering, Tying, or Chaining Your Dog

There are a lot of reasons not to use a tether or chain to keep your dog on your property. A tied-out dog can easily get hurt or so frustrated that they act aggressively or destructively. In California, a law went into effect on January 1, 2007, that prohibits tethering or chaining a dog to a stationary object for more than three hours in a 24 hour period.

If you do need to tether your dog for short periods of time, be sure that you have a safe way to do it, with a trolley on a line that runs between two points, such as trees, allowing your dog room to move around. Connect your dog to the trolley with a leash attached to a body harness--never a choke or prong collar (this is also against the law in California). The leash should be short enough that it won't get tangled or wrapped around your dog, but long enough that your dog can comfortably lie down.

Don't Punish Your Dog for Escaping

Punishment for escaping won't help; as a matter of fact, it can make your problem much worse. If you punish your dog after they've escaped, they'll be afraid to come to you--the opposite of what you want! And if your dog is escaping because of fear or anxiety, punishment will worsen either of those conditions.

If you catch your dog in the act of, say, digging under the fence, you should certainly interrupt them to let them know you don't like it, but that won't teach them not to do it when you're not around. You need to manage the problem instead as described above.

For more information on behavior and training for dogs and cats, please visit our web site at www.sspca.org/pet-carebehavior/.