

To chain, or not to chain?



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Growing up in Truth or Consequences, I often spent weekends with two school friends who lived near Caballo Lake. Their family dog stayed chained to a mesquite tree outside their home. We all knew to give wide berth to this large shepherd mix, as he'd burst into frenzied barking, lunging and trying to attack if we came anywhere close.

In all the years I knew that family, the dog was never let off the chain.

Ironically, his name was Happy.

The practice of chaining, or tethering dogs has long been an accepted method of keeping them from roaming. However, critics of the practice say it poses a risk to public safety and is animal cruelty. A 2008 New Mexico Department of Public Safety (DPS) report requested by the state legislature concurs.

Tethering poses a risk to public safety because chaining for long periods increases anxiety and aggression in the vast majority of dogs, according to the report's information from the Humane Society of the United States. When confronted with a perceived threat, dogs respond according to their fight-or-flight instinct. A chained dog, unable to flee, often feels forced to fight and attacks any unfamiliar animal or person who wanders into his or her territory.

As opposed to protecting the owner or property, a chained dog is often fearful due to poor socialization and previous negative encounters with other animals. The dog realizes one thing – it cannot get away, according to the report. His only recourse may be to growl, bark, lunge or bite in self-defense. Further, a tethered dog that finally does get loose from its chain may remain aggressive, and is likely to chase and attack.

Children are the most common victims of dog attacks, suffering more than 70 percent of fatal dog attacks and more than half of the bite wounds requiring medical attention, according to the American Veterinary Medical Association.

Chained dogs are often frustrated, frightened and easily agitated, so it's not surprising when they attack and bite, according to the DPS report. The reason is logical: dogs are social animals who form strong attachments to their human family members. When isolated, they become bored, lonely, anxious and aggressive.

"They are social animals and they want to be part of a pack, and humans are a part of their pack," said Dr. Jon Morrow of Animal Hospital of Las Cruces. "When they're chained and forced to stay away, it causes anxiety. They are not wired to be solitary animals."

"Without exception, people and organizations widely regarded as experts on the humane treatment of animals and animal behavior agree that a solitary life at the end of a chain is a cruel sentence for these social animals," the DPS report says.

Other problems with persistent tethering is that the dogs lack proper exercise; they are frequently left exposed to the elements because they often lack basic shelter and shade; they are vulnerable to attacks by other animals, people and vermin; are often denied access to food and/or water, and are forced to eat, sleep, urinate and defecate in the same limited space, the DPS report says. Such dogs are commonly neglected to the point that animal control officers and veterinarians see cases where chains, collars and cables become embedded in the neck, often so badly that the dog must be destroyed.

So why do people chain their dogs? Members of my own family have done it, for reasons ranging from lack of fencing to not wanting the dog digging up the yard or jumping on them.

"When many of us were younger, that's what people did, put your dog on a chain in the yard," said County Animal Control Supervisor Curtis Childress. "Animals were considered property and not much thought was given to them being live beings. Our grandparents did it, our parents did it and we do it. "Then there's the other side: My dogs don't go on chains," he continued. "I have a fenced-in yard, well inspected to ensure the dogs can not get out. My dogs live in the house. They have a doggie door to go in and out of when they please. For me, they're not just dogs, they're part of the family." Local animal control ordinances run the gamut on chaining. The city of Las Cruces, much like most New Mexico municipalities and counties, does not have a chaining ordinance at all, according to Animal Control Supervisor Rudy Adame.

Doña Ana County, on the other hand, is one of the few mentioned in the DPS report that not only has a chaining ordinance, but one that is regarded by advocacy group Animal Protection of New Mexico (APNM) as a good example. Its requirements include "a nonabrasive, comfortably fitted collar or harness," a tethering device no shorter than 8 feet, with swivels on both ends, and easy access to shade, shelter, food and water. The ordinance also states that "A dog may be restrained by a chain or tether for no more than eight hours in a 24-hour period."

Despite being hailed as an example, the county ordinance is good only in theory, according to those who work in animal control.

"The reason the eight-hour limit is not enforced is because it was poorly written," said Paul Richardson, former animal control officer and currently kennel supervisor at the Animal Services Center of the Mesilla Valley." In order to prosecute someone for violating this ordinance, an officer would have to prove in court that the dog was chained the entire eight hours. There are only a few ways to do that: parking at the location and bearing witness for the full eight hours, or videotaping for the full eight hours.

"It's what happens when people who haven't experienced the practicalities of enforcement try to write the ordinances on their own," he said.

Enforcement is not only a wording problem, it's a manpower problem as well.

"We simply do not have the resources to go around looking for these issues," Childress said. "We are pretty much reactive in our enforcement efforts because of the high volume of calls we receive and the limited staff that we have."

However, "as we come across these issues the officers do address them," he said. "We try to start off with education and gaining voluntary compliance. If that fails then we would have no choice but to revert to punitive sanctions. We have created our own set of brochures, one of which is about chaining. We provide these materials to the public with information on the various topics as an educational tool."

Community volunteers are trying to help fill the gaps. Reserve officers – citizens with animal control training who ride along with animal control officers – visit areas where chained dogs are reported, and talk to the dogs' owners about humane treatment and alternatives to chaining, said local animal activist Michel Meunier.

Meunier, who heads up the resource organization ACTion Programs for Animals, is also the local representative for national anti-chaining organization Dogs Deserve Better. She recently held the first meeting of the area DDB group, and hopes to attract volunteers who are willing to seek resources and make home visits to people who chain their dogs.

"We get a lot of calls about chained dogs," she said. "It takes a lot of time to respond." Responding can be as simple as mailing information to homes where dogs are chained; sometimes involves multiple visits to a home, convincing a dog's owner to allow contact with the dog in the form of walks or playing, then helping the owner teach the dog social skills, and even helping the owner install a fence if money is an issue.

Sometimes, owners simply relinquish their dogs on the spot, and the volunteer must be prepared to spend time fostering and retraining the dog with the goal of it becoming adoptable.

"It takes people and time," Meunier said. "It's rewarding when you make a difference, and frustrating when you don't."

The bottom line?

If behavior is a problem, "train them not to jump on you," Dr. Morrow said. "Forcing them to be away from you is not going to teach them not to jump." Or, if digging up the yard is an issue, use fencing "to keep the dog away from what you're trying to protect," he said.

"If you're going to have a pet, then you need to be a responsible pet owner," Childress said. And Happy, I hope you're running free, wherever you are.

Kathy Lawitz is vice-president of the Doña Ana County Humane Society.

For more information:

- Download a copy of "The Public Safety and Humane Implications of Persistently Tethering Domestic Dogs," a 2008 report produced by the New Mexico Department of Public Safety in collaboration with Animal Protection of New Mexico:
<http://www.apnm.org/campaigns/chaining/index.php>
- More resources:
<http://www.dogsdeservebetter.org/>
http://www.humanesociety.org/issues/chaining_tethering/tips/chaining_guide.html