



Tompkins County SPCA

Dog Care Series

What Dogs Want

The dog: loving, intelligent, loyal. Long known as "man's best friend," dogs want nothing more than to be members of their families, giving unconditional love in return. Modern life, however, sometimes makes it difficult to give dogs all that they need. But what are the needs of man's best friend? And what can you do if you see a dog who is less fortunate than your own?

Sammy's Story

When Sammy, an adorable mixed-breed puppy with big brown eyes and enormous paws, was brought home from the shelter, he filled his adopted family with joy. The children spent hours in the yard playing with Sammy, and every night found Sammy snuggled in the arms of a sleeping child. In the beginning, it seemed as though there was not enough of the little puppy to go around. Sammy was treated like a member of the family, and he felt like he belonged.

Yet slowly things began to change. As Sammy grew into adulthood and out of his puppyish charms, the family began to tire of the continuous attention he required. Eager to please, yet failing to receive proper obedience training, the young dog never learned the type of behavior that was expected of him. As he grew larger, his playful romping became too rough for the youngsters, and irksome to the adults. In time, the adolescent Sammy was banished to the backyard, where a small doghouse was christened his new home.

As out of sight became out of mind, visits from family members became few and far between. Although Sammy was given food and water, aside from a hurried pat on the head when he was fed, Sammy spent all of his days and nights in solitude. Bored, frustrated, and lonely, the heart-broken Sammy waited for even the briefest showing of attention, depressed at his isolation from the family he had come to need and love.

Unfortunately, Sammy's story is not unique. Whether they are "guard" dogs or just forgotten by guardians who have lost interest in them, "backyard dog" can be found in virtually every community, aching for companionship.

The Social Animal

All people would agree that intentional physical abuse of a dog is a terrible thing. Yet there is another cruel practice to which dogs are subjected far more frequently than corporal abuse. It is a form of mistreatment which is also devastating and painful to a dog, yet often fails to be regarded as abuse at all. It is neglect.

As a society, we have yet to recognize and appreciate the emotional and psychological needs of animals. As a result, while our laws demand that an animal kept as a companion receive the basic requirements of sustenance and shelter, there is no way to guarantee that an animal receive love and attention. For the dog, the absence of human attention and affection is tragic.

Because dogs, like human beings, are pack animals, they, like us, need to socialize in order to remain psychologically healthy. Since domestication, however, companion dogs no longer have packs of dogs with which to live. As a result, they consider humans to be their families, and we serve as their surrogate packs. Moreover, both people and dogs are "den" animals, which is why dogs can be housetrained so easily. They want shelter in a safe, secure den--our homes--and they want to go outside to relieve themselves. Because of the need to socialize and the need for a den, keeping a dog isolated in a backyard goes against a dog's most basic instincts.

The thwarting of these needs results in miserable, lonely dogs who exhibit aberrant and often annoying traits, such as persistent barking and whining. These behaviors, which are the dog's way of pleading for attention, are often met with hostility by the dog's human family, which hurls insults and sometimes objects at the dog in a misguided attempt to quiet the animal. This interaction further fuels the dog's sense of rejection and often fosters in the human guardian a resentment of the animal.



Chaining

A cruel form of containment which sometimes accompanies the "backyard dog" syndrome is chaining. Because chaining is a widespread practice, many people assume it is acceptable. In reality, it is damaging to a dog's health and disposition.

Besides suffering the isolation from his family and den, the chained dog suffers the added frustration of being unable to act out even the most basic dog behaviors of running and sniffing his own backyard. The small circle in which he can move about becomes hard-packed with dirt which carries the stench of animal waste even if the fecal matter is routinely cleared away. The odor draws flies and serves as an excellent breeding ground for parasites which can infect the dog.

Results Of Chaining

Dogs chained for even a few weeks begin to show severe temperament disorders. The most common problem resulting from chaining is hyperactivity, particularly in young dogs. Continually frustrated by their lack of mobility, many chained dogs react with intense enthusiasm, such as dashing around wildly, when they are finally released from their tethers. If there are no physical barriers to hold a dog within the yard, he may run away. Such behavior is, in reality, a logical response to the continued isolation and restriction of movement to which he has been subjected. The dog who has been chained all day or week has little interest in learning to come when his guardian calls. Rather, he is interested in running away as fast as he can from possible reconfinement. Unfortunately, many guardians interpret such

behaviors as the signs of an "unruly" or "dumb" dog, and immediately rechain or isolate the animal to another area, further exacerbating the problem.

Many chained dogs will also begin to exhibit signs of aggression and fear biting. Aware that he is unable to escape any possible danger, the chained dog must result to displaying aggressive behavior as a means of self-defense. Dogs who are chained are often quick to bite, yet, ironically, can also display timid, fearful behavior when handled.

These dogs are showing all the characteristic signs of social deprivation. If prolonged, such dogs literally become mentally ill.

Time For A Change

Dogs offer people undying loyalty and unconditional love. In return, they ask for nothing more than a sense of belonging. The realities of modern life, as well as the dog's own needs, often require that dogs spend some part of the day in the backyard. Many of these dogs receive plenty of love and attention and are happy and healthy companions. Yet to banish a dog permanently to the backyard, while the rest of his "family" enjoy one another inside, is a betrayal of this loving pact-- and that is no way to treat man's best friend.