

You May Think It's Paradise, but It's a Breeding Ground for Aggression

Many dog parents consider this the perfect scenario, but in reality, it can foster a sense of territorialism and aggression in your pet. Get ready to have one of the greatest dog ownership myths exposed.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Some pet owners tend to use their fenced yard as a dog sitting service, but domesticated dogs need help from their humans to stay physically and mentally active
- A dog left alone in the yard can develop undesirable levels of territorialism and aggression
- Letting your dog out back by himself also doesn't mean he's getting all the physical activity he needs to stay fit and well-conditioned
- To ensure your dog gets enough exercise, provide him with the companionship and motivation he needs to stay active
- Power walks can provide important health benefits not only for your dog, but also for you

Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published September 18, 2017.

Many pet parents specifically choose homes with fenced-in yards — or they fence in an existing yard — so their dog has a place to run around off-leash.

“The problem with that,” says veterinarian and animal behaviorist Dr. John Ciribassi, “is that people start using their yards as babysitters. But dogs don’t only need physical exercise, they also need emotional exercise as well — mental stimulation.”¹

He says what often ends up happening is the dog starts cueing on triggers outside the yard, which can lead to extreme displays of territorialism. These include barking excessively, rushing the fence and showing signs of hostility toward people or other dogs passing by.

This, in turn, can lead to issues with aggression, says Ciribassi. His advice is to not allow a fenced yard to substitute for daily leash walks around the neighborhood and ongoing reward-based behavior training.

“Secondly,” says Ciribassi, “when your dog’s out in your fenced yard, you should be out there with him.” Engage in playtime and training exercises, and just be there with him. “Dogs are social,” Ciribassi reminds us, “and to just stick them out in the yard alone is like taking an infant and sticking him in a playpen while you go out to work.”

A Fenced Yard by Itself Also Doesn't Lead to a Well-Exercised Dog

There's another persistent myth among dog owners that goes hand-in-hand with what Dr. Ciribassi discussed above. It's the notion that dogs allowed access to fenced-in backyards are automatically getting all the physical exercise they need.

Sadly, many dog parents persist in the belief that no further effort is required to exercise their pet as long as the dog has a backyard to run around in. Nothing could be further from the truth. Now, it's true your dog may appear to be very active when she first enters your backyard, as she gets busy with her daily doggy chores. She needs to patrol the perimeter and sniff around for signs of intruders.

She'll probably also perform a thorough inspection of the barbeque if you have one, carefully select just the right spot to relieve herself, stalk a bird or two and maybe run back and forth along the fence for a bit.

But once she's completed all the items on her To Do list, you'll find her standing at the door waiting to be let back in. If you don't comply, her next move may be to fixate on what's happening outside the fence, as Dr. Ciribassi mentioned above. Eventually, especially if the weather is nice, she'll lie down for a nap. Needless to say, none of these activities should be considered exercise!

Just Like You, Your Dog Needs a Reason to Exercise

Wild dogs spend most of their time resting to conserve energy for hunting, and because they don't know how long it will be until they eat again. Domesticated dogs evolved in a similar fashion. Studies show that when your dog has no other dogs around and no humans encouraging him to be active, he'll spend 80% of his time snoozing.

Dogs who have other dogs around for company spend a little less time resting — about 60%. The bottom line: like their owners, dogs need reasons to get physically active.

Even the biggest, greenest backyard isn't by itself enough to motivate your furry family member to get the exercise he requires to stay in good physical condition. The best and really the only way to make sure your dog gets enough exercise is to provide him with the companionship and motivation he needs to stay active.

How to Keep Your Dog Active and Fit

Canines are designed for movement. If your dog doesn't get regular opportunities to run, play and exercise aerobically, even if he's not overweight he can end up with arthritis and other debilitating conditions that affect his bones, joints, muscles and internal organs. In addition, many canine **behavior problems** are the result a lack of physical and mental activity.

Your dog should be getting an absolute minimum of 20 minutes of sustained heart-thumping exercise three times a week. Thirty minutes is better than 20, and six or seven days a week is better than three. It's important to keep in mind that simply strolling with your dog isn't an adequate workout. He needs sessions of power walking — moving at a pace of 4 to 4.5 miles an hour (about a 15-minute mile) to achieve good cardiovascular intensity and caloric burn.

Power walks can provide important health benefits not only for your dog, but also for you, including lowering your risk of obesity, diabetes, heart disease and joint disease. In fact, if you do it right, power walks with your dog may just replace your need for a gym membership.

And what could be better than spending some extra bonding time with your pet, while insuring he’s getting all the physical activity he needs to be healthy? First, though, you have to reprogram your pooch if he’s grown accustomed to sniff-piddle-dawdle walks. Don’t expect to make a one-day transition from leisurely strolls to power walking. It will take several sessions for him to catch on.

Of course, you’ll also be taking your dog on casual walks, so you’ll need to help him learn to distinguish between the two. It could be a time of day thing — for example, you could schedule slower walks for first thing in the morning and again before bedtime, and workout walks in between.

Or you could develop a verbal cue that tells your pet he’s about to go on a power walk. It’s strongly encouraged for you to use a harness for exercising with your dog. A leash attached to his collar can quickly become a health hazard as you’re cruising city streets or even country roads. Many dogs learn which walk they’re going on by whether the leash gets attached to their collar (short walk) or a harness (time to get serious!).

Other Options for Exercising Your Dog

If you aren’t able to move at a power walk pace, you’ll need to involve your dog in other types of cardiovascular exercise like swimming, fetch, Frisbee, agility competition, flyball or dock jumping. You might also consider a bike ride alongside your dog using a special dog bike leash.

Some dog parents believe if they do lots of weekend activities with their pet they can make up for lack of exercise on weekdays. But the problem with this approach is that you can actually create injury to your dog by encouraging him to be a weekend warrior.

When a dog’s body isn’t well conditioned, sudden bursts of activity can cause injuries that lead to long-term joint damage. Consistent daily exercise is a much safer approach. Even if you have a huge fenced-in backyard, your dog won’t get the exercise he needs unless you get out there with him and engage him in activities that will give him a consistent cardiovascular workout.

Sources and References

[dvm360 July 20, 2017 \(Archived\)](#)

[Applied Animal Behaviour Science September 1992](#)

¹ [YouTube, A fenced yard does not equal enrichment for a dog](#)
