

The Backyard Dog

Perhaps the biggest and most widely held misconception about dogs is the belief that they will be healthy and happy living only in the backyard. However, nothing could be further from the truth. Current studies in dog psychology show that dogs isolated in backyards are highly likely to develop serious behavioral problems that often result in euthanasia for the animal.

DOGS ARE PACK ANIMALS THAT THRIVE ON COMPANIONSHIP. Much like their wolf ancestors, dogs are very social. In fact, dogs are more social than humans and need to be part of human families. When you own a dog, you become the dog's pack and he wants to be with his pack. Forcing a dog to live outside with little or no human companionship is one of the most psychologically damaging things a pet owner can do to a dog.

DOGS ARE ALSO DEN ANIMALS. This means that they like to have a safe, quiet, and secure place to sleep, rest, and hang out, such as your house. Your dog has a wonderful ability to learn and therefore to be housetrained. A dog who resides more in your house than in the yard is a much happier animal, because of the security of a den and your companionship.

BACKYARD DOGS HAVE MORE BEHAVIORAL PROBLEMS. Since all your dog's instincts are telling him it is not good to be left alone or isolated from his pack, your dog can become very stressed or anxious. A dog exhibits stress by digging, barking, howling or whining, chewing, escaping, and exhibiting hyperactivity. These problems can become so troublesome that your neighbors may complain about the barking, howling, property destruction, or your dog escaping.

BACKYARD DOGS ARE HARDER TO TRAIN. Considering that the backyard dog does not develop a strong bond towards your family, he is harder to train than a dog allowed to be in the house with your family. This also makes him less responsive to commands.

BACKYARD DOGS MAKE LOUSY GUARD DOGS. As a dog becomes naturally protective of where he lives (his territory or turf), he will only defend the place he lives in. If he is never allowed in the house, then the house will not become a place to protect. Most people keep their valuables inside their houses, so why wouldn't you want your dog to protect the inside of your house? Unless allowed to live inside, your dog will not develop that sense of territory. He will not sound the alarm when someone tries to invade your house. It is not uncommon to hear stories of families being robbed while their backyard dog slept through the whole episode.

BACKYARD DOGS HAVE HIGHER RATES OF EUTHANASIA. Backyard dogs are more often given up than house dogs because they were never looked upon as family by their human pack. Sadly, that means they are easier to dispose of. Backyard dogs do not have the opportunity to become socialized to people and other dogs, and may become so fearful or even vicious that they may have to be euthanized.

WHAT CAN YOU DO:

KEEP YOUR DOG WITH YOU! At a minimum, your dog should have access to your living space whenever you are home, including sleeping inside your house at night. You do not have to spend every waking moment actively playing and talking to your dog; just the fact that your dog can lay quietly at your feet while you watch TV, work at your computer or sleep, is very important to his mental well-being.

NEVER TIE OR CHAIN YOUR DOG UP OUTSIDE. Dogs that are tied up or chained outside suffer extreme frustration, which can result in hyperactivity and/or aggression against humans. Dogs that are tied up cannot

escape from other animals or people who mean to do them harm. They can also easily become entangled and do bodily harm to themselves. In fact, in California, there are laws against tethering your dog!

THINK ABOUT HOW MUCH TIME YOU'LL DEVOTE TO YOUR DOG. People who keep their dogs outside constantly rationalize it. They insist that they do spend time with their dogs, they do feed them, and walk them. Spending an hour a day with your dog is not enough for his mental welfare. Be realistic! What about when it is rainy, windy, cold, or just plain too hot? Are you still spending that hour daily with your dog no matter what? Making the backyard your dog's only home does not make him a real part of the family.

DO YOU FIT THE STATISTICS? Our lives have changed. It used to be that most people did spend a lot of time in the yard; playing, working, gardening, and socializing. Now with the age of computers, televisions, and hectic schedules, we actually spend about 75% less time outdoors in our yards, and therefore less time with our devoted friend, the dog.

TRAIN YOUR DOG! If your dog is untrained, take him to training class so you can develop better communication skills with him, and teach him how to act appropriately in the house. If you have a young puppy, get him into a puppy training and socialization class as soon as he turns 12 weeks old. Don't wait until he is six months old and has already acquired a taste for tipping over the garbage can or chewing on your rug. If you acquire an older dog, training him as soon as possible will help him adjust to his new household and your family (his new pack). To learn more about training programs at the Animal Community Center, visit www.hssv.org/training.

GIVE YOUR DOG A CHANCE TO BE YOUR BEST FRIEND! Don't kick him out because you think he is untrainable, unruly, or because it is good for him to be outside. Instead, take the time to make him a part of your family, a part of your pack.