

How to Help a Chained Dog

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When a homeless dog arrives at the doorstep of your home or shelter, you know that his good treatment is assured. A bath, medical treatment, some hugs, food, refuge, and placement with a loving family—you can help give him what he needs. But what about the dogs who'll never make it that far, the ones you see chained up in yards every day on your way to work?

Whether they've been driven to obsessive barking or just silent depression, dogs who live out their days on the end of a chain are in a sad gray zone of pethood. They may be "owned" by someone, but that status is merely a legal technicality; a dog left tethered has none of the sense of belonging these natural pack animals treasure. And while their lonely situations are often not dire enough to warrant seizure, there are other ways to help chained dogs come in from the cold. Sometimes it just takes a little friendly persuasion.

1. Gather Information

When you talk to owners of chained dogs, remember to check your assumptions at the door so you can understand their real motivations. In some cases, owners with allergies may have concluded that the only way to stop their noses from running and their eyes from itching is to keep their dogs outside. In other cases, dogs may have lived inside for a while but then developed a behavior problem that owners didn't know how to cope with. Or the owners may have grown up in households where pets were routinely kept outside; it may never have occurred to them that they could treat their pets differently.

None of these are excuses for keeping an animal chained, but they can help you understand people's reasons for doing so. Your mission—should you choose to accept it—is to help pet owners see that their circumstances can be improved for both their own good and the good of the dog. You'll be able to shape your approach best if you listen to what people have to say.

2. Share Your Knowledge

Once you've heard an explanation of why the owner keeps his dog outside, help him understand why it's not a good idea. Whether he's a compassionate person who just doesn't know better or someone who'll be persuaded only by fear of penalties, the realities of chaining provide powerful arguments that will challenge almost any underlying motivation:

It's cruel—and it's not just humane societies that think so. The USDA has also found tethering to be inhumane, issuing a statement on the matter in 1996: A tether significantly restricts a dog's movement. A tether can also become tangled around or hooked on the dog's shelter structure or other objects, further restricting the dog's movement and potentially causing injury. What's more, dogs are naturally social animals; for them, being left in the yard for hours or days on end is the equivalent of solitary confinement—and may have similarly depressive psychological effects.

It's dangerous for people and other pets. Dogs who are chained tend to become protective of the tiny space they have access to. According to a 2000 study in the Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association, nearly 20 percent of the fatal dog attacks in the United States between 1979 and 1998 occurred while a dog was restrained on his owner's property. An attack like this is tragic not just for the victim but for the dog: The animal might be ruled dangerous and be subject to seizure. The owner might also be liable.

It's dangerous for the dog. Not only can the chain become tangled, but many times it's much too heavy for the dog to have any freedom of movement. The dog also won't be able to get away from people or other animals who may try to hurt him. If you can provide these arguments in the form of a brochure or information packet, all the better. Owners may be nervous or defensive when you're speaking to them in person, but they'll have information they can refer to once you've left. Create a brochure of your own—or request copies of the “Do Your Chain Your Dog?” flyer from The HSUS.

3. Provide Better Options

Once you've explained why chaining is a problem, address the concerns that may have led to it.

If the issue is behavioral, explain that chaining will likely worsen existing behavior problems and create new ones. If you have a behavior program or work with a trainer in your community, provide that information and suggest that the owner attend a class with his dog. Ask if the animal is spayed or neutered; if he's not, suggest the surgery as a possible means of curbing the animal's desire to roam the streets.

If the animal is an escape artist, suggest ways to deal with his Houdini habits. Diggers can be stymied by better fencing; the owner can bury chicken wire to a depth of one foot below where the fence meets the ground (be sure to bend in the sharp edges), or he can place large rocks at the base of the fence. Jumpers can be stopped by adding a 45-degree inward extension, available at home improvement stores, to the top of an existing fence.

If the owners have allergies, suggest medication. Point out that it may not be the animal they're reacting to. Suggest regular cleaning of drapes and upholstery, the biggest dander repositories. Suggest an air purifier with a HEPA filter. (If you add these to your shelter's wish list, you can even donate them to pet owners who seem willing to try bringing their animals indoors).

If the owners are just doing what they've always done, be kind and nonjudgmental in relaying the facts about the cruelty and ineffectiveness of chaining. Explain that you understand that animals have always been kept outdoors in their family, and that many people (perhaps even you) grew up that way, too. Then point out that more information and better options are available today. The owners can start a new family tradition—one in which the dog is part of the family.

4. Don't Throw the Book at Them—but Mention It

Having the law on your side is a powerful tool that can sometimes turn a reluctant or recalcitrant owner into the picture of willing cooperation. (If your community doesn't already have an anti-chaining ordinance, [information on sample legislation and other materials are available from The HSUS.](#))

Working in an area that doesn't have a law specifically related to chaining puts you in more tenuous territory. But the owner in question may be in violation of some other ordinance. If the animal is too skinny, if he has an ingrown collar, if he barks all the time and annoys the neighbors, if he has no shelter from the elements, or if he is a danger to passersby, you may have another way to approach the issue.

It's difficult for a private citizen to enforce a law, but if you are approaching owners as a concerned individual, you needn't threaten them. If your other methods of persuasion don't work, you might simply let them know that a chained dog law exists. Explain what it says—or provide a copy of the ordinance if possible. Let the owners read it and see that they're in violation.

Explain that you would far prefer to see the dog brought inside and made comfortable than to see a fine issued or the animal removed. Ask the owners how you can help make that possible.

5. Make the Best of It

If the owner is unconvinced and you don't have a law to compel him to free the dog from his chain, you may still be able to improve the current situation in a way that everyone—you, the owner, and the dog—will be happy with.

If the chain is too short or heavy, suggest or provide a lighter tether. Pulley systems that allow the dog more room to roam are a better, though imperfect, option.

Provide plans for building a doghouse, so that the animal will at least have rudimentary shelter. Doghouses can be purchased at most pet supply outlets, but you can also provide the owner with plans to build one. (The HSUS has blueprints for easy-to-build doghouses; [learn how to obtain a copy.](#))

Some organizations have started doghouse donation programs. By serving as a clearinghouse for doghouses, shelters and advocacy groups can provide pet owners who aren't ready to bring their fourlegged family members all the way inside with the next best alternative.

Resources

The HSUS offers a free packet that includes sample anti-chaining ordinances from around the country, a "Do You Chain Your Dog?" flyer that explains why chaining is ineffective, and articles and studies related to the topic. To obtain a packet or a copy of doghouse-building plans, call The HSUS's Companion Animals staff at 202-452-1100.

[DogsDeserveBetter.com](#) is a helpful website that includes advice on introducing local antichaining legislation. The site also offers downloadable brochures and information leaflets that will help hone your approach to working with pet owners.

Operation Doghouse, started first in Bedford, Virginia, and later

adapted by the Johnson County Animal Protection League in North Carolina, is a great model for a doghouse distribution program. Donors can give funds, “dogloo”-style housing, or building materials. They can even build doghouses using plans the League distributes. Check out www.jcapl.org for a description of the Johnston County program; for information about the Bedford program, see www.bestfriends.org/allthegoodnews/magazine/BFMmar00.pdf.

PETA sells posters and brochures with images of chained dogs and compelling messages such as “Life Sentence, No Parole” and “A chained dog can only watch as life goes by ...” Fact sheets from the organization provide advice on helping dogs relegated to the backyard and educate readers on the elements of acceptable doghouse structures. All the materials are available in pdf format as well. To download or purchase the items, visit www.petacatalog.com.