

Sassy's Story and the Question of Tethering

Question: What do these dog owners have in common?

- Owners who hike and camp with their dogs
- Owners in residential developments with architectural and fencing restrictions
- Disabled and blind owners
- Owners of working, herding, hunting, field trial and sled dogs
- Owners of escape-artist dogs

Answer: These and other good dog owners may choose to utilize tethering to provide their dogs with exercise and keep them safe.

Providing dogs with secure housing, exercise, playtime, and socialization is a concern for all owners. In recent years, tethering as a method of confinement for dogs has become a controversial topic, and numerous legislative proposals to ban or restrict tethering have been introduced in response to requests by anti-tethering activists and animal rights groups.

Supporters of such proposals often recycle appalling photos of dogs with bloody collars embedded in their necks and starving dogs on chains with no water or shelter. Pictures of such cruelty would horrify any dog lover.

But are tethering bans really the solution their supporters suggest? Laws in all 50 states already make it a crime to let a dog suffer injury from an imbedded collar or to fail to provide a dog with necessary food, water and proper shelter. A new ban on tethering is unlikely to impact the actions of lawbreakers who treat dogs cruelly in violation of existing laws. However, these proposals will adversely affect law-abiding citizens who use a variety of safe and accepted methods to humanely tether their dogs. *A better and more effective way to protect dogs from mistreatment is to ensure enforcement of cruelty and negligence laws, regardless of the method of confinement an owner chooses.*

Proposed anti-tethering laws are problematic for responsible owners who utilize tethering to improve the lives of their dogs. Consider the following:

Blind and disabled dog owners who don't have fenced yards or immediate access to dog parks. Should disabled persons be prevented from allowing their service dogs to enjoy outdoor playtime and off-duty relaxation via a tether?

Dog owners who hike and camp in parks where dogs must be restrained. Should these owners be forced to leave their dogs behind on these mutually-enjoyable adventures because they are not allowed to safely tether their dogs while resting on the trail or while in campsites?

Owners who live in residential developments where fences are prohibited or restricted to a height insufficient to safely contain a dog. Should their dogs be denied outdoor exercise and playtime on tethers?

Owners of hunting dogs, field trial dogs, and dogs properly conditioned to be humanely tethered outdoors in conjunction with training, hunting, and events.

Owners of sled dogs who use tethers and weatherproof dog houses to ensure the comfort and safety of sledding breeds that thrive in arctic climates.

And what about owners of escape-artist dogs? Not every owner is able to stay with their dogs 24-7. Dog owners have jobs, school, children, and other obligations. Tethering with proper access to shade, shelter, and water may keep an escape-artist dog safe when a fence does not.



Sassy is a "pit bull". She lives in a quiet suburban neighborhood with a family of two adults, an 8-year-old boy, and a 10-year-old girl. Sassy spends most of her time inside with the family and sleeps at the foot of the bed.

Outside the downstairs family room is "Sassy's Place", a covered brick patio enclosed on three sides. Sassy's Place has a ceiling fan, dog toys, a cushy dog bed, a bowl of fresh water, and a snug doghouse. Sassy can step off the covered patio onto the beautifully landscaped grass of the fenced backyard for a potty break or to catch some rays.

On weekday mornings, Sassy comes to the kitchen for breakfast, has a walk around the neighborhood (on leash, of course), then chases balls and flying discs in her fenced backyard. Her family leaves for work and school at 7:30 a.m. While they're away, she spends her day in Sassy's Place.

Her family returns home around 5:30 p.m. and their first priority is to greet Sassy, throw some balls for her, and bring her inside. She takes part in the family's activities until bedtime. Sassy usually sleeps in the boy's room, though sometimes she prefers the cool bathroom floor.

Sassy is a happy, healthy, well-adjusted, well-loved dog.

But Sassy's days may be numbered—because Sassy's owners use a tether to keep her safe when she's in Sassy's Place.

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The issue is complex, and publications on tethering yield conflicting information. Proponents of anti-tethering laws often cite statistics that appear to indicate that tethered dogs are more likely to become aggressive. However, the conclusions about possible detrimental effects of tethering fail to isolate tethering as the direct cause of these problems. For example, was the dog's inappropriate behavior caused by the tether, or did it result from prior or concurrent neglect, abuse, teasing, or some other factor?

What do the experts say?

A Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine study on sled dogs concluded that "our findings provide no evidence that tethering was any more or less detrimental to dog welfare than being housed in pens" and urged additional controlled studies.¹

The United States Department of Agriculture Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (USDA/APHIS) prohibits facilities regulated under the Animal Welfare Act from using tethering as a means of primary enclosure for dogs unless approved in writing. This [rule was subsequently clarified](#) to recognize that under certain circumstances the use of tethering may be entirely appropriate and humane. APHIS additionally stated that the rule did not intend to imply that tethering of dogs under all circumstances is inhumane, nor that tethering under any circumstances must be prohibited.²

Both the American Kennel Club (AKC) and the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) have issued policy statements regarding animal welfare and the humane care of dogs, and both strongly condemn neglect and cruelty. The AVMA has not issued a specific policy statement on tethering. AKC's statement can be viewed [here](#).

The AKC supports use of cruelty and negligence laws to address a broad range of issues of animal mistreatment regardless of the source. AKC advocates for proper care and humane treatment of dogs that include an adequate and nutritious diet, clean water, clean living conditions, regular veterinary care, kind and responsive human companionship, and training in appropriate behavior. The [AKC's Care and Conditions of Dogs Policy](#) states, among other provisions, that a dog's primary enclosure shall be constructed and maintained so that dogs are securely confined and does not cause injury to the dogs. Protection from adverse or extreme weather conditions must be provided. Dogs should have play and exercise on a daily basis and daily positive human contact and socialization.

The AVMA's Animal Welfare Division states, "The AVMA has not adopted specific policy on tethering as proposals to date have been based primarily on various groups and individuals' perspectives rather than on actual data, and because the conditions under which dogs may be tethered are so highly variable. The impacts of tethering on dogs have not been well quantified and appear to be substantially impacted by breed, environmental conditions (e.g., substrate, climate, and what is available to the dog to occupy its time), opportunities for contact with conspecifics and people, and the duration of time the dog is confined."

Responsible owners use a variety of creative indoor and outdoor solutions to care for their dogs. Dogs come in all shapes and sizes, and owners are encouraged to carefully evaluate each individual dog's age, health, coat type, conditioning, and unique characteristics when determining the best ways to provide housing, safe confinement, playtime, training, socialization and other care.

¹Seong C. Yeon, et.al. *A Comparison of Tethering and Pen Confinement of Dogs*, Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science, (2001, Lawrence Earlbaum Associates, Inc.), 4(4), 257-270.

²Federal Register, Vol. 62, No. 186, Sep. 25, 1997, Rules and Regulations, 50244.

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You see, Sassy is a skilled escape artist.

This is dangerous for any dog, and especially for a pit bull—a type of dog that suffers from many misconceptions.

Despite her owners' investment in a variety of fences, electronic confinement systems, and combinations thereof, Sassy continued to climb out, dig out, and defeat every boundary.

Sassy never went far. Neighbors said she just trotted around for a few minutes and then napped by the front door until her family got home. But during those few minutes of walk-about she was an at-large dog, which is against the law. And she wasn't safe.

What was her family to do? Doggie day care businesses in the community would not take a pit bull. Ten hours a day was too long to leave her in a crate. They tried letting her stay indoors and hired a dog walker to come in at midday. That worked for a few days, but then Sassy started tearing down draperies and destroying doorframes.

That's when the family tried tethering her in Sassy's Place. They carefully considered a safe length for the tether, made sure she would have shade, shelter and access to a potty area at all times of the day, and arranged it so she would not tangle with any impediments.

It worked. Sassy now stays safely tethered in Sassy's Place within the fenced backyard. Nothing is damaged, and Sassy is relaxed and ready to play when her family gets home.

But now the local county council is considering a tethering ban brought before them by a group of activists who claim that tethering is cruel and should be outlawed. A closer look at the proposal reveals that not only do the activists want to ban tethering; they also want to ban all unattended outdoor confinement of dogs, whether tethered or in fences.

So what will happen to Sassy? And to other dogs in the community? And to beloved dogs everywhere whose owners use tethers, pens, and fences to keep them safe?

These questions are being faced by dog owners across the U.S. as activists attempt to use legislation to impose their beliefs on others.



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