

What Dogs Need to Be Happy

By Sherry Woodard

Most dogs are loving, intelligent, and loyal. They want nothing more than to be members of a family. They give unconditional love, but they need love, attention, and kindness in return. In this fast-paced world, we all have so much to do that a dog's needs can be easily forgotten. Some dog owners may not even realize how much attention a dog needs for him or her to live a happy life. This story illustrates how this "benign neglect" can happen:

Cowboy's Story

Cowboy is a border collie mix. When he was brought home as a puppy from a local shelter, his adoptive family thought the world of him. The boys spent hours playing in the yard with Cowboy, and every night he climbed into bed with one of the kids. In the beginning, it seemed like there wasn't enough of Cowboy to go around – he was very much a part of the family.



Slowly, however, things began to change. As Cowboy grew into an adult dog, he started losing his puppy charm. The family started feeling that he required too much attention. He had never had training, and the antics that were cute when he was a puppy were now annoying. He had never been taught the difference between appropriate and rough play, so the boys avoided playing with him. His uncontrolled exuberance in the house caused him to break things. When he scratched a visiting child, he was exiled to the backyard from that day on.

The family bought Cowboy a nice doghouse and new, bigger bowls for food and water. The boys were assigned the job of feeding Cowboy and keeping his water bowl filled. As the days passed, however, the boys stopped giving Cowboy daily meals. They just filled his big bowl every two days; his water was often dirty and warm.

One day, the family came home and Cowboy was gone. They found a hole that Cowboy had dug under the fence. His family walked the streets near their home, calling his name. They found him at the park – the boys used to play with him there when he was small. Cowboy ran to them when he saw them; they were so glad to see him that they hugged him and walked him home.

But then, after a few days, Cowboy escaped again. This time, the family decided that for Cowboy's safety, they should tie him on a chain so that he could not dig out again. As the weeks passed, Cowboy waited in vain for the boys to come out and play with him. He started barking, sometimes for hours, trying to relieve his boredom and loneliness. When the boys came out to feed and water him, Cowboy naturally became very excited. He would leap and jump at the end of his chain. The boys didn't let him off his chain very much, since he was hard to catch when it was time to put the chain back on.

Unfortunately, this story is true for many dogs. In most communities, there are dogs living through each day alone in a backyard, some on chains. Now, all people would agree that intentional physical abuse of animals is a terrible thing. Yet, the isolation and neglect that Cowboy suffered, however unintentionally, is also a form of abuse.

Dogs are social animals – one of their most basic needs is to spend time with other creatures. Dogs who are left alone most of the time are being asked to go against their basic nature, and that’s too much to ask of a dog.

Because there are no laws that require love and attention be given to animals, no one can demand that dogs like Cowboy be treated differently. Often, the dog’s distress gets worse over time. The neighbors start complaining about the incessant barking. The family starts yelling at the dog to get him to stop. Whenever anyone does spend time with him, the dog is unruly and overexcited, so they avoid him even more.

Chaining a dog as a form of long-term containment is often damaging to his health and disposition. Out of sheer frustration, many dogs run for hours every day in the circle allowed by the chain. They run through their own waste, and flies are attracted by the smell and may begin to eat away at the dog’s ear tips until they are raw and sore.

If a chained dog is released by his family for exercise, he often will refuse to come when called, since he’s so reluctant to be chained up again. The family may see this as disobedience, so the dog is put back on the chain and is let off less and less. Some chained dogs will begin to exhibit aggression, and some lose the ability to interact with other dogs.

What happened to Cowboy? Cowboy was one of the fortunate ones. He came here to Best Friends because his family thought he was too much of a nuisance. At first, he only walked and ran in circles – he had been on his chain for almost a year. He loved people but could not focus. He would stop for a toy or treat and then begin to circle again. As the months passed, however, his circles became bigger and bigger. Eventually, he was adopted into a good new home. We have kept in touch with his new family and they say, “He is the world’s greatest dog!”

We hope Cowboy’s story can help to change the lives of other dogs like him.

Sherry Woodard is the animal behavior consultant at Best Friends. She develops resources and provides consulting services nationally to help achieve Best Friends’ No More Homeless Pets mission.