

100 Dog Behavior Problems

Separation Anxiety – Synopsis

“There are several likely reasons that separation anxiety develops.”

Separation anxiety occurs when dogs become distressed when separated from their owners and cannot relax while being home alone. Many dogs with separation anxiety follow the owner from room to room in the home and rarely spend time alone outdoors. Dogs with separation anxiety often begin to become anxious and show distress as the owners prepare to leave. Dogs with separation anxiety will start showing signs when the owner prepares to leave the house, will continue when left alone, and show exaggerated welcoming behaviors when the owner returns.

There are several likely reasons that separation anxiety develops. In some cases, the problem develops as the dog matures and becomes increasingly attached to its owners. In other cases, there have been changes in the household that are distressing to the dog, or the dog has experienced something that caused anxiety when it was home alone. The primary problems reported are vocalization, damage to property, inappropriate elimination or other signs of anxiety such as salivation (see (99) Separation Anxiety).

What are the most important pre-departure training tips?

1. Ignore any attention seeking behaviors and use rewards only when your dog is calm and relaxed such as in a down/stay; slowly shape the behavior by increasing the time the dog must remain calm before giving attention (see (56) Learn to Earn – Predictable Rewards and (61) Teaching Calm – Settle and Relaxation Training).



2. By the use of favored reinforcers including food toys, chew toys, and treats, you can gradually teach your dog to stay in place for longer intervals before giving affection and attention. Begin teaching this behavior by moving a very short distance away and then returning to the dog while it remains in place, giving a reward for the correct behavior.
3. Your goals are to work toward a daily routine with scheduled times for enrichment with social interactions, play and training (predictable attention), followed by times where the pet gets no attention (predictable inattention) and either plays with its own toys or rests and relaxes. Try and develop an inattention schedule that coincides with your departure times (see (54) Enrichment, Predictability, and Scheduling).

4. Try to establish a particular location where the pet spends its alone time, either napping or playing with its own toys. This might also serve as the dog's sleeping location. Train your pet to stay in this location during its inattention times while you are at home. If practical a crate can minimize damage to the house and prevent house soiling, but some pets become more anxious when confined (see (50) Crate Training – Positive Confinement – Why to Crate Train, (51) Crate Training – Guide – How to Crate Train, and (52) Crate Training – Synopsis). A favorite toy, an item of clothing with the owner's scent, aromatherapy, pheromone therapy, or even a TV or CD left on may help to relax the pet.

What are the main departure training tips?

1. Identify and isolate all cues that make your dog anxious as you prepare to leave (e.g., getting keys, putting your coat). Either find a way to avoid these cues, or to habituate your dog to these cues by exposing your dog to the cues multiple times without leaving. By giving favored treats or a tummy rub each time you present these cues, your dog may even learn that they are associated with something positive (a technique called counter-conditioning). When practicing habituation, the dog must be calm between presentations of the departure cues. If the dog is not calm, its anxiety might actually increase rather than decrease when presented with the cues.
2. Before any actual departures make sure your pet has had an enrichment session and has settled down in its rest area for a time of inattention. Provide numerous favored food-filled toys or chews and any additional cues (from pre-departure #4) to help your pet settle. Depart only when your dog is settled and distracted. Leave calmly and quietly, ignoring the dog as you depart.
3. Begin with short departures and return fairly quickly, before the dog has a chance to get anxious. Gradually increase the length of departures.
4. It is important to continue with departure training only when the dog is calm, settled and quiet when left alone. If the dog experiences anxiety during your absence it is not learning how to be left home alone and the separation distress may increase.
5. If you suspect that your dog is becoming more anxious, stop all training departures and contact your veterinarian for advice.

What things should I do when I return home?

1. When you arrive home, ignore your dog until it is settled and then provide an attention and play session. Do not reprimand your dog for any undesirable behaviors that might have occurred while you were gone, since this does not help to make your dog any less anxious or to cease the undesirable behaviors.
2. Try quietly entering from a different door (if possible), and reward your dog if it is calm or sleeping.



Are there any other strategies that can be helpful for a busy family? Teaching your dog how to calmly be left home alone takes time so additional arrangements may need to be made during treatment. Daily boarding (doggy daycare), pet sitters or taking the dog to a neighbors home all may help prevent the destruction, elimination, vocalization and distress that your pet experiences until they have learned the new tasks.

What about medications such as prescription drugs or pheromones?

Depending on the severity of the anxiety, most dogs will benefit from the short-term use of drugs and/or pheromones until the problem can be controlled. Clomipramine (Clomicalm[®], Novartis Animal Health), Fluoxetine (Reconcile[®], Elanco) or (Adaptil[™]), used for a minimum of two months have been found to be effective. Some dogs may also need faster acting anti-anxiety drugs or additional arrangements (e.g., doggy day care) in the short term, until the drugs and training begin to make an impact.