

All About Pets

The national pet care information service



ALONE AT HOME



THE BLUE CROSS

Britain's pet charity

Dogs with separation anxiety cannot bear to be parted from their owners, and often exhibit problem behaviour when left alone.

Putting your relationship on a more independent footing is the first step towards a more confident and happy dog.



Reasons for separation problems

There are many reasons why dogs exhibit problem behaviour when left alone. For example, boredom may be a key factor or young dogs may not have learned that it is unacceptable to bark, dig or chew household items. Others may behave in an unacceptable fashion because they cannot cope with being separated from their owners and become anxious. The advice in this leaflet is designed specifically to provide help for dogs that suffer from anxieties and insecurities when left alone.

What can happen?

No dog should be left alone for prolonged periods, but dogs with separation anxiety cannot be trusted alone even for just a few minutes. Some may become destructive, others are noisy, and some may become so frantic that they can mess in the house.

Which dogs are most likely to develop separation anxieties?

Adopted dogs seem to be especially prone to separation problems, particularly during the first few weeks in their new home or if they are shy, sensitive and submissive. Such dogs are usually described as having a “wonderful temperament” and being “loving and affectionate”. They tend to be the ones that bond with a new owner quickly and strongly.

Separation anxieties are more likely to occur if dogs have been rehomed before they were one year old, and especially if they have had many different homes.

How can separation anxiety problems be prevented?

Teach your dog or puppy to tolerate short, planned absences. Leave your dog in the room where they will normally be left, close the door and walk away. After a short time (less than five minutes), go back in without greeting. Do this several times in one session and repeat the sessions throughout the day. Gradually extend the period of time that your dog is isolated. If your pet becomes distressed, begins to bark, scratch at the door, or has chewed anything when you return, leave for a shorter period next time and progress more slowly.

Continue until absences of 30 minutes can be tolerated without a problem and then begin to go through the normal leaving preparations, such as putting on your coat and picking up your keys before leaving the dog alone in the room.

- Exercise your dog, with a walk and by playing games, well in advance of leaving so that your dog has time to settle down
- When you go out, do not say goodbye – just walk out. The contrast between you being there and not being there is then much reduced.
- Provide a small meal a short time before departure so that your dog is more likely to be sleepy
- Leave your dog somewhere where any damage done will be minimized. This should be well away from electrical wires and valuables, and where any barking is least likely to annoy neighbours. It is important to leave your pet in the house, where they will feel most secure, rather than out in the garden.
- Leave the animal with something special to chew – a large rawhide chew with small titbits forced between the layers will keep your dog occupied and distracted during the first few minutes of your departure. It is in the first few minutes that your dog feels most distressed so this helps the animal cope and become accustomed to being alone.



- Wearing an old sweater or T-shirt before leaving and putting it in your dog's bed will sometimes help. You need to renew your scent on this garment each time you leave the house – leaving it at the bottom of the dirty laundry basket will save you from having to wear it each time.
- Some dogs are comforted by the familiar sound of a radio playing – or you could record 30 minutes of your family's conversation and play this as you leave
- When you return, greeting rituals should be kept short and without great excitement. Do not, on any account, punish, scold or be angry with your dog. Consider it your fault if something has gone wrong and seek further help if necessary.

Towards a more permanent cure

In order to cope when you leave the house, your dog must first be comfortable without constant reassurance from you at home. The following tips will help to set the relationship between you on a more independent footing and prevent some of the overdependence that fuels separation problems.

- Ignore any approaches made to you. Do not speak, tell off, touch or look at your dog. When you decide to give attention, call your dog to you and make as much fuss as you like. Do this as often as possible so your dog is learning that quiet, detached behaviour brings lots of attention.
- Decide on set periods of time during when you either ignore your dog, or you play and give attention. This builds a more independent relationship than if you are constantly touching and talking to your dog as you move around the house.
- Prevent your dog from following you from room to room. If you have taken on an adult dog, start this training as soon as you take your dog home. Close the door behind you when you go into another room so the dog is isolated for a few minutes until you return. Coolly acknowledge the pet's presence when you go back in but do not make a big fuss.
- Keep departure cues, such as looking for car keys and putting on coats, to a minimum
- With a newly acquired dog, arrange for your dog to sleep in the kitchen at night rather than in the bedroom so that the animal is not with you constantly for such a long period
- Steadily build your dog's confidence by using only reward – based methods of training

Symptoms of separation anxiety

- Your dog follows you from room to room, unwilling to let you out of sight even for a moment
- A strong bond is formed with just one person in the household to the exclusion of others
- Problem behaviour begins as soon as you leave. The first 15 minutes are the worst, during which time the dog becomes extremely upset. All the physiological signs of fear may be present – an increase in heart and breathing rate, panting, salivating, increased activity and, sometimes, a need to go to the toilet. The dog may try to follow you, scratching at doors, chewing at doorframes, scratching at carpets or jumping up at windowsills to look for a way out. Alternatively your dog may bark, whine or howl to try and persuade you to come back.
- After this frantic period, your dog may settle down to chew something that you have recently touched that still carries your scent. Dogs will often chew scented items into small pieces and curl up in the debris so that your dog forms a “barrier” of your scent around them for protection.

Why punishment makes it worse

It is natural for owners to be angry if they return to find damage to their home, mess in the house or annoyed neighbours. Sensing this anger, dogs show submission in an attempt to appease the owner and reduce any punishment they might otherwise be subjected to. Unfortunately, a submissive posture (ears flat, head lowered, crouching, tail between legs) is often misinterpreted by owners as guilt. They often say, “See, he knows he has done wrong.”

Any punishment given on returning home is ineffective. Dogs associate punishment with what they are doing at the instant they are punished and so your dog will not associate the telling off with their actions before you came home, even if you take the animal over to the scene of the crime. It is not that your dog cannot remember what happened, just that it is natural to think the punishment is for what is going on at that moment, rather than what your dog did hours earlier.

Punishment is not only ineffective, but it is also likely to make the problem worse. Now, in addition to being anxious about being left, the animal is also worried about the owner returning.

Further advice

Acquiring another dog or cat to keep the “problem” dog company is not recommended. Another pet will be no substitute for you and the separation problems are likely to persist. Consider taking on a second dog only if you would like another dog anyway, not just because you want to solve a problem with your existing dog.

If your dog has severe separation anxiety or other behavioural problems, please contact us and we will be able to inform you of the nearest member of the Association of Pet Behaviour Counsellors (APBC). Alternatively write to the APBC, PO Box 46, Worcester WR8 9YS.



All About Pets

The national pet care information service

All About Pets provides expert advice, information and support for pet owners. It aims to ensure the welfare of Britain's pets by promoting responsible animal care. For further information and advice on caring for your pet or horse visit www.allaboutpets.org.uk. Alternatively, you can write to us at the address below to request a list of available leaflets.

All About Pets is a service of The Blue Cross, Britain's pet charity, which provides practical support, information and advice for pet and horse owners. Through our network of animal adoption centres we rehome thousands of animals each year. Our hospitals provide veterinary care for the pets of people who cannot afford private vets' fees.

How you can help

The Blue Cross is a registered charity and receives no government funding. We rely entirely on the generosity of pet lovers to help support All About Pets and other vital animal welfare projects. Any contribution would be most welcome. For more information on how you can help call us on 01993 822651 or visit our website at www.bluecross.org.uk.



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