

Dog: Separation-Related Problems



Dogs generally don't enjoy alone time. They are highly social animals, genetically programmed to be in a pack with other individuals 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Dogs can learn to be alone for moderate periods of time, but it doesn't come naturally and some dogs can develop separation-related behavior problems.

In severe cases, the dog may be suffering from separation anxiety, a disorder best described as canine panic attacks (see below for more information). But many separation-related problems can be solved with schedule adjustments, more activities for your dog, and careful training.

What Can Trigger Problems?

Separation-related problems are often triggered by some sort of life change, for example re-homing, a stay at a boarding kennel, a death of a key family member, or a major change in routine, such as months of the owner being home all day followed by sudden eight-hour absences.

Symptoms to look for include excessive and/or distressed vocalization and behavior, destruction, and house soiling.

Know with What You're Dealing

The first step is to get an accurate diagnosis of your dog's behavior. A dog that barks or destroys things while left alone might do so out of frustration, pent-up energy, or unfulfilled social needs. Medical issues can cause house-soiling. To find out for sure what your dog does and why, set up a video or web camera and record your dog when you leave him alone.

What You Can Do

Prevention is the best way to head off separation-related problems, and it's a must for puppies, young dogs, and newly adopted dogs. Again, dogs have to learn to handle being alone.

Here are some guidelines:

Arrange many brief absences. Puppies and newly adopted dogs are at higher risk of developing separation-related problems if they are smothered with attention their first few days home. It is much better to leave for brief periods (from a few seconds to a few minutes) extremely often so the dog's early learning about your departures is that they are no big deal and predict easy, tolerable absences: "Whenever she leaves, she comes back."

Break up the day. A normal workday for us is an eternity for a dog. If everyone in your home works full time out of the house, consider hiring a dog walker or enrolling your dog in a doggie daycare. This breaks up your dog's day and leaves him nice and tired when he gets back.

Exercise mind and body. Give your dog both physical and mental exercise. Not only does problem solving increase confidence and independence, it is mentally tiring and therefore increases the likelihood your dog will rest quietly when left alone. Teach him to play hide-and-seek with his toys, teach him tricks, get him involved in a sport like flyball or agility, let him play with other dogs, feed him all his meals in KONG® toys or other food-dispensing toys, or teach him how to play fetch and tug. The more activities and toys are incorporated into his life, the less he will depend on human social contact as sole stimulation.

Dog: Separation-Related Problems *(continued)*

See our handouts *Independence Training*, *Crate Training*, and *KONG Stuffing* for more inspiration.

Separation Anxiety

Separation anxiety is a serious and heart-breaking disorder. Dogs who suffer from separation anxiety experience the canine equivalent of panic attacks every time they are left alone. They might urinate, defecate, bark and cry, lose interest in any food left for them, and frantically scratch and chew at doorframes in an attempt to get out to find their owners.

It's important to understand that these dogs are not getting back at their owners for leaving or behaving the way they do out of spite or anger. Rather, they are consumed with terror at being left alone. To them, it's a matter of survival.

Treatment possibilities include various medications and a formal program of systematic desensitization to change the dog's deeply ingrained emotional reaction to departure. Some dogs with severe separation anxiety need to be on medication if they are ever to be left alone for any length of time.

If you suspect your dog suffers from full-blown separation anxiety, you need help from a qualified professional. Contact Dr. Berger, SF SPCA's board-certified veterinary behavior specialist. Don't live in the Bay Area? Search locally for a veterinary behavior specialist (Dip ACVB) or a Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist (CAAB or ACAAB).