



HELPING YOUR DOG TO COPE WITH BEING LEFT ALONE

Improving destructive behaviour caused by separation anxiety

Separation anxiety and insecurity are problems that may affect dogs from any walk of life. Some may end up in Rehoming Centres because owners cannot deal with a destructive dog, so it is essential to help your dog learn to cope with being alone from an early age or as soon as you get him. This can be as simple as not letting him follow you around the house and leaving him alone for some quiet time with a safe chew toy for 20 minutes or so on a regular basis.



Why is my dog destructive?

Some dogs can become over attached to one person in the family and then can't cope when they are left on their own. This type of dog may also be destructive even if left with another dog, because it is that particular person that he misses and not simply just company.

Destructive behaviour (which can include tearing up furniture or belongings, soiling or urinating in the home, persistent barking or even self-mutilation) is used by dogs to cope with the anxiety that they feel. It can help a dog take his mind off being so lonely and may release 'happy' hormones which will make him feel better. If a dog cannot cope, he will probably be most destructive or display these behaviours during the first 20 minutes of being left. **Please note that no dog should be left for longer than 4 hours at a time on a regular basis** – or even the most confident and happy dogs may develop all sorts of behaviour problems.

With a little work and some slight changes to your relationship with your dog, the destructive problems associated with separation anxiety can be reduced to an acceptable level – making for a much happier, relaxed dog and owner.

Please remember that destructive behaviour is not a purposeful or spiteful act by your dog – they just aren't capable of that. Punishing your dog on your return for anything he may have done in your absence will only increase the amount of anxiety and confusion that he feels when you leave him. Unless you catch your dog in the act, he will not know that the punishment is related to what he has done and therefore it will have no effect on the unwanted behaviour. All it will do is increase his general anxiety and make the problem far worse.

The first step - teaching your dog to feel comfortable without you around

If you have a very insecure dog, it is **essential** that you do not allow him to follow you from room to room in your home. If he is unable to be relaxed enough for you to go into another room without him for just a few moments, you cannot even begin to think about going out and leaving him for a number of hours.

- Choose a room where it is quiet and where you and your dog are happy for him to be. Install a baby gate or tall barrier, so that he can see and hear you whilst you are in another room but cannot follow you. Gradually push the door closer and closer to being shut so that he slowly learns to relax on his own. Try leaving the radio on and give him something to chew on such as a stuffed 'Kong' toy or large rawhide chew to occupy him. He will soon learn that it is normal to be left on his own for short periods of time whilst the family are doing other things.
- If this is not an option - perhaps you have an open-plan house – then consider introducing your dog to an indoor kennel. Please read our factsheet on the indoor kennel or talk to your vet or behaviourist about this. **Please note** that under no circumstances should a dog be left in an indoor kennel for long periods of time, or as a means of stopping behaviour problems such as destructive chewing without actually dealing with the problem in the first place. This could lead to your dog hurting himself by self-mutilation.
- If your dog is displaying any unwanted destructive or noisy behaviour when you return to 'his' room, do not enter or speak to him but walk away again. If you speak or enter the room when he is doing something that you do not want him to do, you will be rewarding these unwanted actions and they will increase. To an insecure dog, even being shouted at to be quiet is a reward for this behaviour.
- Once you are able to leave him in a room with the door shut, if he is displaying an unwanted behaviour when you intend to enter the room, then do not enter and instead bang twice on the door but say nothing. This should distract your dog into being quiet or stopping what he is doing.
- You will now need to time 2 minutes on your watch. This is called the disassociation period and is how long it takes for your dog to forget what he was doing! If he is still behaving after the 2 minutes is up, you can enter the room. This will make your dog think that his quiet or good behaviour has brought you back.
- If 2 minutes does not pass before your dog starts the unwanted behaviour again, repeat the 2 bangs on the door and wait for a further 2 minutes.
- The first time that you do this you will need to be patient, for it may take a short time for your dog to understand what is happening and to learn from it.

This is teaching your dog that leaving the room and shutting the door behind you doesn't mean that you are leaving permanently and his good behaviour will bring you back shortly.

Once your dog has learnt to be left for short periods you should be able to lengthen this time gradually. If your dog displays the unwanted behaviour when he is left for longer periods, then you will need to use the 'banging on the door' method again and increase the disassociation period slowly, perhaps add thirty seconds at a time, until he can be reliably left for longer.

Step two – incorporating the following into your daily routine

- **Encourage your dog to use his room for quiet rest**, undisturbed by the rest of the family. If you find your dog in his room, always gently praise and reward him for being in the right place.
- **Do not allow your dog to follow you from room to room.**
- **Vary the times of day that you take your dog for walks.** If your dog is in the habit of always exercising at the same time and then you have to go out without your dog at this usual walking time, your dog will become very stressed and more likely to display his destructive behaviour.
- **Everyone that lives with you and your dog should take part in supplying the dog's 'life rewards'.** These are all of the things that your dog needs in everyday life, such as feeding, training, walks and games. If only one person supplies the majority of these, a dog is likely to become over attached to this person leading to insecurity when they leave.
- **When going out and leaving your dog alone in the home and when returning, make sure that this is very low key.** Avoid long drawn-out farewells or lots of fuss and attention on your return, as this makes it a big event in your dog's eyes. Leaving casually and ignoring your dog for a few minutes on your return will show him that you going out is no big deal. If your dog is

very excited on your return, ignore him for a few minutes and then greet him quietly when he has calmed down.

- **Closing the curtains and providing him with safe chews or toys** may help to make it easier for him to be alone. Placing an unwashed item of your clothing on the floor on the other side of the door may trick your dog into thinking that someone is still in the house with him. Try playing a relaxation tape, or soothing classical music to drown out any outside noise that may disturb him.
- **Speak to your vet about obtaining and using a DAP.** The Dog Appeasing Pheromone plug-in device emits a comforting scent that may help to calm your dog and make him feel more relaxed when left alone.

If you need more help with your dog's destructive behaviour and anxiety problem, please ask your vet to put you in touch with a behaviour specialist – or contact us for further information.

You may also be interested in these other factsheets from Dogs Trust: Dogs Trust Guide to behaviour problems, The Indoor kennel, Beating boredom.

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