

# Canine separation anxiety: strategies for treatment and management

*Rebecca J Sargisson*

- [Journal List](#)
- [Vet Med \(Auckl\)](#)
- [v.5; 2014](#)
- [PMC7521022](#)

## Abstract

Dogs with separation-related behavior problems engage in unwanted behavior such as destruction of property and excessive vocalization when left alone, causing distress for both the dog and the owner, and often leading to the dog being relinquished or euthanized. I review research on factors likely to predispose dogs to developing separation anxiety and on the treatments available.

Although research is equivocal, dogs seem to develop separation-related behavior problems if they are male, sourced from shelters or found, and separated from the litter before they are 60 days old. Protective factors include ensuring a wide range of experiences outside the home and with other people, between the ages of 5–10 months, stable household routines and absences from the dog, and the avoidance of punishment. The most successful treatment for canine separation-related problems may be behavior modification that focuses on systematic desensitization and counterconditioning, which can be supplemented with medication in the initial stages. Where individual therapy from an animal behavior expert is not possible, advice to dog owners should be clear, simple, and contain five or fewer instructions to improve adherence. Advice is given for people seeking to adopt a dog, for new dog owners, and for existing dog owners who wish to treat their dog's separation anxiety.

**Keywords:** systematic desensitization, counterconditioning, medication, separation anxiety

## Introduction

Dogs without separation-related behavior problems are passive and inactive in their owner's absence,<sup>1,2</sup> and the initially anxious behavior of puppies separated from their owners<sup>3</sup> has been found to decrease quickly after adoption.<sup>4</sup> Dogs with separation-related behavior problems, in contrast, engage in undesirable behaviors when left alone. The most common of these are destruction and excessive vocalization, including whining and barking.<sup>5–9</sup> Less common problem behaviors include inappropriate elimination (urination and defecation), self-injurious behavior (eg, over-grooming), increased or repetitive motor activity (eg, pacing), attempts to escape, trembling, salivation, and depression.<sup>10,11</sup>

The bond formed between dogs and their human owners is consistent with an attachment.<sup>12</sup> The emotional attachment between adult dogs and their owners, even in the absence of separation-related behavior problems, has been found to be similar to that displayed by human adults and

their children.<sup>13</sup> This is not surprising given that dogs have been selected for their dependence on humans over 10,000 or more years of domestication.<sup>13</sup>

While most dogs are emotionally attached to their owners, anxious dogs exhibit more attachment behaviors than dogs that are less anxious.<sup>13</sup> Separation anxiety has been defined as distress in the absence of an attachment figure.<sup>14</sup> In addition to performing unwanted behaviors in the owner's absence, dogs with separation-related problems will often show signs of excessive attachment to their owners.<sup>15</sup> For example, dogs may follow their owners around when they are home, and when their owners are preparing to leave the house.<sup>6,15</sup> Some dogs will begin to whine, pace, pant, or freeze as their owner's departure becomes imminent.<sup>15</sup>

If the rate or intensity of separation-related behaviors increased across the separation period, we might hypothesize that the dog was bored.<sup>16</sup> Instead, the peak intensity of separation-related behaviors occurs shortly after the owner's departure.<sup>16</sup> Dogs with separation-related problems also tend to engage in excessive excitement when the owner returns.<sup>6,15</sup>

However, while some researchers have provided evidence to suggest that dogs with separation-related problems are excessively attached to their owners,<sup>6,15</sup> other research contradicts this finding.<sup>17</sup> Parthasarathy and Crowell-Davis<sup>18</sup> found that dogs spent the same amount of time in close proximity to their owners in an attachment test, regardless of their scores on a test of separation anxiety, suggesting that the time spent close to the owner would not be a useful diagnostic indicator of a separation-related problem. Stephen and Ledger<sup>19</sup> found high significant correlations between ratings of separation anxiety given by dog owners who relinquished their dogs to shelters and ratings given by the dogs' new owners, suggesting that it is not attachment to particular humans that is problematic for these dogs, but a problem that the dog takes with them to new contexts. In fact, the correlation between ratings given by new and former owners for separation anxiety was higher than for any other reported canine problem. Stephen and Ledger's<sup>19</sup> findings suggest that dogs who have not received treatment for separation-related problems are unlikely to improve when rehomed.

## **Importance of separation-related problems**

The incidence of separation-related behavior problems has been estimated at 20% of the dog population.<sup>20</sup> However, diagnosis of a canine separation-related problem generally relies on indirect evidence, such as evidence of destruction or reports of barking by neighbors, because the problem behaviors occur primarily in the absence of the owner.<sup>10</sup> The reliance on indirect evidence may lead to under-reporting and under-diagnosis.<sup>11,20</sup>

When left alone, dogs can cause much damage to a home, and injure themselves in the process. Overall<sup>21</sup> described a dog who destroyed drywall, tile, and insulation in a home. This dog tore its tongue, broke teeth, and suffered cuts to its face and feet. A dog with separation-related problems in a study by Gaultier et al<sup>7</sup> ate part of the home electricity supply, setting fire to the house in its owners' absence. Dogs that engage in excessive vocalization when left alone are likely to prompt complaints by neighbors and visits from local authorities. Sherman and Mills<sup>22</sup> note that living with a dog with separation-related problems causes emotional and financial distress in the home, which can lead to the surrendering of the dog. Indeed, separation-related problem behaviors are