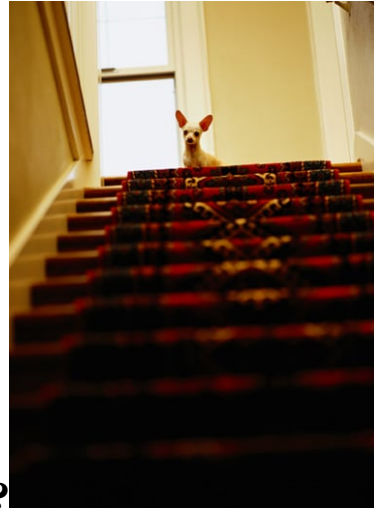


Separation Anxiety in Dogs | VCA Animal Hospital | VCA Animal Hospitals

Separation anxiety may be preventable with proper socialization and training when a puppy

Puppies should be well socialized with other animals and people (See handout "Puppy Behavior and Training - Socialization and Fear Prevention"). Puppies need to learn how to have alone time and amuse themselves with their toys. When you bring your puppy out of alone time to socialize with the family, make sure that you only get him when he is quietly playing with his toys. Reward the behaviors that you want your puppy to continue. A well adjusted puppy should do well either alone or with the family and will be less likely to have separation anxiety in the future.



How do I know if my dog's problem is due to separation anxiety?

Separation anxiety describes dogs that usually are overly attached or dependent on family members. They become extremely anxious and show distress behaviors such as vocalization, destruction, or house soiling when separated from the owners. Most dogs with separation anxiety try to remain close to their owners, follow them from room to room and rarely spend time outdoors alone. They often begin to display anxiety as soon as the owners prepare to leave. Many but not all of these dogs crave a great deal of physical contact and attention from their owners. During departures or separations, in addition to vocalization, destruction and elimination, they may be restless, shake, shiver, salivate, refuse to eat, or become quiet and withdrawn. Although typically the behavior occurs every time the owner leaves, in some cases it may only happen on selected departures, such as workday departures, or when the owner leaves again after coming home from work. Dogs with separation anxiety are also often quite excited and aroused when the owner returns.

Separation anxiety might be prevented by ensuring that puppies have scheduled times where they learn to spend time alone in their own crates or beds. Some dogs appear to have separation anxiety but are afraid to be home alone because something bad has happened to them while alone (e.g., storms, fireworks). Dogs that have both separation anxiety and noise or storm phobias will need treatment for both problems.

Are there other reasons that my dog may engage in these behaviors?

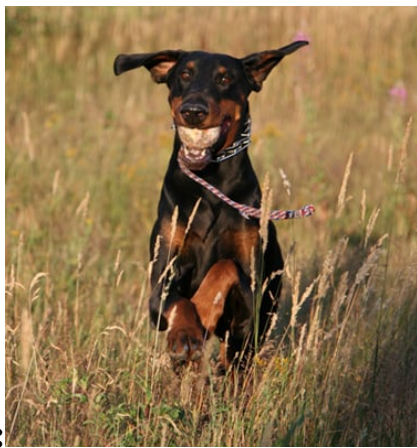
Dogs with separation anxiety vocalize, become destructive, or eliminate beginning either as the owners prepare to leave or shortly after departure. Destructive activity is often focused on owner possessions, or at the doors where owners depart or the dog is confined, and most often occurs shortly after departure. The vocalization is due to distress and may therefore consist of howling or whining. If the dog destroys, vocalizes, or eliminates both while the owners are at home and when they are away, other causes should first be considered. Dogs that eliminate when owners are at home may not be completely house trained or may have a medical problem. If the destruction, elimination and vocalization are more likely to arise the longer the owners are away from home, it may be that they are being left alone too long. Barking when the owners are away could be due to the sounds of strangers or other animals on the property. Some dogs will attempt to escape or become extremely anxious when confined, so that destructiveness or house soiling when a dog is locked up in a crate, basement, or laundry room, may be due to confinement or barrier anxiety and associated attempts at escape.

"...make an audiotape or movie clip of the behavior when the dog is alone."

These dogs should be assessed to see if they act in the same way when they are confined while the owner is at home. In other situations fear or anxiety due to an external event (construction, storms, fireworks) may trigger destructive behaviors. Old dogs with medical problems such as loss of hearing or sight, painful conditions and cognitive dysfunction may become more anxious in general, and seek out the owner's attention for security and relief. Perhaps the best way to determine if the behaviors are due to the anxiety associated with the owner's departure is to make an audiotape or movie clip of the behavior when the dog is alone.

Where do I start?

Before you can begin, be certain that your dog has a sufficiently enriched environment and a predictable daily routine (see Using Enrichment, Predictability, and Scheduling to Train Your Dog). In addition, all rewards should be identified to ensure that they are only being given for those behaviors that you want to train and not for attention seeking or following. In other words, you should use the very rewards that your dog is seeking to teach independent behavior and to spend time relaxing away from you (see Using Predictable Rewards to Train Your Dog). Until you can get your dog to settle and relax while you are at home, he is unlikely to settle when you leave.



The steps you need to follow are:

1. Establish a predictable routine

Since your dog is anxious, you need to begin by making his day calmer and more predictable whether you are home or away. Establish a daily routine so that your dog can begin to predict when he can expect attention (including exercise, feeding, training, play and elimination) and when he should be prepared for inattention (when it should be napping or playing its favored toys). Try to schedule these times for object play and naps at times when you would normally depart.

2. Environmental enrichment - meeting your dog's needs

During the times when you are interacting with your dog, make sure that you are meeting all of his needs for social interactions, play, exercise, training, and elimination. In effect, you should initiate enough regular interactive sessions and provide enough play and attention so that when each session is over, your dog is prepared to settle down and relax. At this point, new exploratory and chew toys can be given so that your dog has novel and motivating toys on which to focus when it is time to settle. Feeding toys can also replace standard food bowls to make feeding time more of a mental and physical effort.

3. Establish a predictable protocol for rewards

If your dog has separation anxiety, it's likely that your dog's favored rewards are the attention and play that you provide. Treats, food, play and chew toys may also be highly desirable.

"What behavior does my pet need to learn and what behavior should I never reinforce?"

Take each of your dog's most valuable rewards and ask yourself: "What behavior does my dog need to learn?" and "What behavior should I never reinforce?" With separation anxiety you must reinforce your dog for settling down, relaxing and showing some independence, while attention seeking and following behaviors should never be reinforced. Therefore, training should focus on extended and relaxed down stays and going to a bed or mat on command (see Teaching Calm – Settle and Relaxation Training). If your dog seeks attention, you should either ignore your dog entirely until he settles, or have him do a down-stay or go to his mat. After sufficient time in the down-stay or on the mat, give attention or affection as a reward. Gradually shape longer periods of inattention before attention is given. The goal is not to ignore the dog, but rather to ignore attention-seeking behaviors. You want your dog to learn that calm and quiet behavior is the only way to receive attention.

4. Train "settle" (see Teaching Calm – Settle and Relaxation Training).

The goal of training is that your dog learns to settle comfortably on cue. Focus on having your dog in a settled down, or lying on his bed or mat (or crate) before you give any reward. Not only should attention-seeking behavior be ignored, but all casual interactions should be avoided for the first few weeks, so that it is clear to both you and your dog that a settled response achieves rewards and attention seeking does not. Practice down stays and mat exercises using food lures, clicker training or head halter training, whichever is most effective. Gradually shape longer stays and longer times on the bed or mat before attention, affection, treats or play is earned.

5. Develop an area and surface for relaxation

Having a bed or mat location (in a room, pen, or crate) where your dog can be taught to rest, nap, play with his toys or even sleep, can provide a secure area where your dog might settle when you are not home. You can begin by training your dog to go to the area and gradually shape longer stays and more relaxed responses in the area before rewards are given. It might be helpful to have a barricade, tie down or crate that could be closed to ensure that your dog remains in the area for long enough at each session before being released. On the other hand, know your dog's limits; your dog must be calm and settled when released so as to avoid reinforcing crying or barking behavior. At first, your dog can be taken to this area as part of his training routine using a toy or treat as a lure, or by using a leash and head halter. In time, a daily routine should be established where the dog learns to lie on his mat after each exercise, play and training session to either nap or play with his own toys. This is similar to the routine for crate training, where the mat or bed becomes the dog's bed or playpen. Other than play, exercise and training sessions, focus on giving your dog some or all of his rewards (treats, toys, chews, affection, feeding toys) only in this area. Audible cues such as a radio or TV; odors such as aromatherapy candles or a piece of clothing with the owner's scent; and a comfortable bed can help to promote a relaxed response since they are associated with relaxation and owner presence (non-departure).

6. Work on responses to simple commands.

For some dogs, it is also useful to have them earn all things. This can be as simple as having the dog respond to a command such as "sit" before receiving anything he wants. For example, if your dog asks to go outside, prior to opening the door the dog is given the command to "sit," and once he complies, the door is opened. This technique can be used for anything the dog desires.

When I need to leave, what can I do immediately to prevent damage?

This is an extremely difficult question. The goal of treatment is to reduce your dog's level of anxiety by training her to feel comfortable in your absence. This can be a long process.

"Most owners will need to deal with