

Home Alone

Coping skills for dogs left at home

By Jane Marshall and Mary Dow – APS Dog Trainers

Dogs are highly social animals; their need to be with people is great. This is true of all dogs from the more “independent” breeds, who bond exclusively with their immediate family, to those who adore their family plus everyone on the horizon!

But for some dogs this close emotional attachment to their families can lead to anxiety when they are alone. Left in an anxious state (with no coping skills) they may whine or bark constantly, soil the house or chew furniture and accessories in an effort to comfort themselves.

In some seriously distressed dogs the damage to the home can be devastating. Dogs have been known to destroy doors and tear up woodwork, especially near exits, in their efforts to re-join their families. Leaving these dogs in a crate can often make things worse. The confinement can cause panic attacks in which the dogs sustain injury while trying to free themselves. For these very traumatized dogs a special behaviour program is needed to rehabilitate them, sometimes medication is also required.

No-one knows what truly causes separation problems in dogs but there is thought to be a genetic component and it would appear that some breeds are more susceptible than others. Lack of early learning may be a contributing factor. Certain events such a stay in a kennel, moving house or being re-homed have all been known to trigger anxiety.

Fortunately, there are some easy routines which can be put in place to help a puppy or dog when it first comes to it's new home. These can enable it to develop the confidence it needs to cope when left alone.

The main area to work on is teaching the dog to settle down and entertain itself while you are present. Many dogs who develop separation problems never learn this skill. If your dog follows you around everywhere and needs to continually nuzzle against you for affection, sleeps in your bed at night and barks at you for attention, then he is probably becoming over dependent on you. When you leave, what does he then do? His main source of entertainment and comfort has gone.....

All dogs should be taught to settle down, enjoy their own company and comfort themselves with appropriate chew toys. It is a skill as necessary as house manners and house training. New puppies & dogs should not be encouraged to sleep in your bed. Rather they should be in their crate in your room or on their cozy dog bed. If after a few months the puppy seems confident and content the rules may be relaxed. But for now your new pet needs to learn independence.

Although your new dog or puppy should receive lots of handling and attention, make sure you schedule periods of time every day when you are around but not available. For puppies it is ideal

to have a play pen where favorite toys may be placed. Alternatively a baby-gated kitchen or his crate (after good exercise) is a safe and enjoyable place to learn “alone training.” Crating your puppy or dog for periods of time when you are home will avoid him turning into a dog who refuses to go into his crate because it signals your departure.

Adolescent and adult dogs can learn “indoor tethering”. A 6 foot leash is secured to a heavy piece of furniture such as a table leg and the dog’s bed, a bath mat or towel is placed at this spot. The dog is then put on his leash and given a special chew toy to occupy himself with. Chew toys that work well for these “alone” situations are hollow sterilized bones and rubber toys (e.g. Kong toys). These can be filled with a mixture of peanut butter, kibble and left over meat scraps and should entertain your dog for a while. Once the dog is settled and quiet gentle praise can be given.

If your dog finds it difficult to settle you might sit quietly nearby, read a book and ignore him. Release him only after he settles. (This is a good excuse to catch up on favorite TV programs!) Gradually sit further from your dog and eventually you should be able to leave the room for varying periods of time.

Do make sure your dog’s exercise needs are being met before beginning this training. Young dogs needs several periods of aerobic exercise each day in order for them to settle nicely at home.

Make sure all your comings and goings are low key. Leave calmly and cheerfully giving your dog a stuffed toy to occupy him a short while before you depart. When you return say “Hi” but only reward calm behaviour with your attention. If you greet your dog as he launches himself at you when you return to the house you are actually rewarding this rude behaviour and indicating to him that it is appropriate. Ignore him until he settles - then say your hellos.

Teaching a “sit” for attention will help. You can then praise and pet him calmly.

If you think your dog has developed separation problems please consult your veterinarian.