Taking Measures to Prevent Separation Anxiety Related Behaviors

How (and why) to keep your dog from developing separation anxiety.

By Pat Miller

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Thank goodness, I have never owned a dog with separation anxiety. This complex behavior challenge can be one of the most difficult to live with, and one of the toughest to resolve. The dog who panics when left alone may manifest a range of behaviors that the average owner finds intolerable, including serious household destruction (I've heard about dogs who have clawed holes through the walls of their homes, all the way through the outdoor siding), self-injury from biting or clawing at doors or walls, hysterical vocalization (nonstop whining, crying, barking, howling, and/or screaming), and inappropriate defecation and urination – on floors, carpets, beds, and owners' possessions.

Separation anxiety (SA) stems from a dog’s natural survival instinct to stay in close proximity to the pack. In the wild, a canine who is left alone is more likely to die, either from starvation, since he has no pack to hunt with, or from attack, since he has no pack mates for mutual protection. Given the vital importance of a dog’s canine companions, it speaks volumes about their adaptability as a species that we can condition them to accept being left alone at all! We're lucky we don’t have far more SA problems than we do, especially in today’s world, where few households have someone at home regularly during the day to keep the dog company.

Recipe for Failure

It’s not enough that dogs are naturally inclined to become anxious when left alone. Many well-intentioned but misguided owners of new dogs inadvertently set the stage for SA by doing all the wrong things when they first bring their new dog home.
For example, lots of families adopt their new dog or puppy at the beginning of the summer, when the kids will be home to spend a lot of time with him. Other new-dog parents may take several days off from work, or at least arrange to bring the dog home on a Friday afternoon so they have the entire weekend to help the new kid settle in. On its face, this is a thoughtful approach to acclimating the dog to his new life. What better way to help him feel comfortable and welcome than to give him a couple of days of your loving company?

It's true that spending extra time with the newcomer can help smooth the transition for him, but unless you take some important precautions, you could be setting him up for a rude awakening on Monday morning when you go back to work, leaving him alone all day to wonder and worry the pack is ever coming back to rescue him from solitary confinement.

**Recipe for Success**

The key to SA is to never trigger it in the first place. This is without a doubt one of those behaviors where it is well worth investing in many ounces of prevention, lest you end up spending many beginning with making a wise selection of your new family member.

Dogs adopted from animal shelters seem to have a higher than average incidence of SA. We don't know whether this is because dogs with SA are more likely to be recycled through shelters by their frustrated owners, or because the stress of shelter life triggers SA in previously unaffected dogs. It's likely that both explanations play a significant role. This doesn't mean that you shouldn't adopt from a shelter. It means that you need to look for signs of potential SA whatever the source of your new dog, and especially if you adopt from a shelter or rescue group.

Dogs who seem anxious in general are more likely candidates for SA, particularly those who are worried and clingy. Velcro dogs who won't leave your side in the get-acquainted area, even though they have just met you, can be hard to resist. “She loves me already,” you think to yourself. “How can I possibly leave her here to face the risk of euthanasia?”

Indeed, that kind of instant bond can be very endearing in the moment. It is far less so when you get home from a hard day’s work to find your sofa cushions in shreds, and dog feces and urine smeared across the kitchen, or worse, a note from your landlord informing you that elderly Mr. Jones with a heart condition who lives in the apartment next door called 11 times today to complain that someone was screaming at the top of their lungs in your living room. If you do think that’s your furry soulmate glued to your leg in the get-acquainted room, do a simple test. Place an inexpensive pillow or cushion that you have purchased at Goodwill for this very purpose on the chair or floor, and leave the dog alone in the room for 10 minutes. Wait outside, close enough that you can hear any activity. Ideally, the shelter will have a one-way window into the room, so you can watch her but she can’t see you. Now, take note of what she does.

A certain amount of activity is normal. She might explore the room, playfully chew on the pillows or other dog toys, snuffle at the door, and stand up on her hind legs to look out the window. She might even whine or bark a bit to see if anyone responds. As long as she seems relatively calm, and settles down after several minutes, you’re not looking at SA behavior, despite her instant and endearing connection to you. You will still need to take precautions not to trigger SA once you get her home, but again, that's easier than undoing an existing condition.
If, however, she charges in a panic from one end of the room to the other, digs frantically at the door, flings herself bodily at the window, shreds the pillow into tiny pieces and proclaims her distress vocally and insistently, you are looking at a serious behavior challenge. If you choose to adopt her anyway, be prepared to enter into a long-term, potentially costly relationship with a good, positive behavior counselor and a doggie daycare facility.

Puppies are less likely to come complete with a fully developed set of SA behaviors, but again, some are more likely candidates than others. Puppies will naturally exhibit some concern at being isolated from their littermates, but the pup who happily visits with you or explores his new environment is a safer bet than the one who shows immediate distress and a single-minded determination to return to his siblings. A conscientious breeder who makes an effort to separate littermates for brief, non–traumatic periods between the ages of six to eight weeks can help set the stage for a puppy who is able to tolerate being left alone when he arrives in his new home.

Prevention Program

There are two primary ingredients in a successful New Dog/Puppy Separation Anxiety Prevention Program. The first is to resist the natural impulse to return to and reassure the new dog or puppy every time he cries. The second is to build his trust that you have not abandoned him. Here are the 10 steps of a two–day program to create a dog who is comfortable being left alone:

1. Arrange to bring your dog home at a time when someone will be able to spend a few days with him. This does help ease the stress of the transition.

2. Have a quiet, safe space prepared for your new dog in advance. A playpen or puppy pen is ideal for a puppy or small dog, and allows him to be confined quietly, but still in your company. (See “Prepping and Training Young Puppies (/issues/2_1/features/Training–Young–Puppies_5145–1.html),” WDJ January 1999). Another alternative is a dog–proofed room such as a laundry room.

3. When you bring the dog home, first give him a chance to relieve himself outdoors, and spend 10–15 minutes with him in the house under close supervision. Then pen him and stay in the room with him. Arm yourself with a good novel; this is an all–day project!

4. Stay close to your dog at first. Read your book, and if he fusses to get out of the pen, ignore him. When he is calm, take one step away and then return, before he has a chance to get upset. Pet him calmly a few times and then go back to reading your book.

You are starting to teach your dog that he doesn’t have to be with you every minute, and that if you leave, you will return. You want him to become secure in the knowledge that you always return.

(Note: If there are other human family members, you will need to choreograph their presence and movements also. The plan is to get the dog accustomed to being left alone, not just to get him used to you being away from him.)

5. As long as the dog stays calm, continue to occasionally step away, gradually increasing the distance and varying the length of time that you stay away, so that eventually you can wander around the room without upsetting him.
Each time you return, greet him calmly. You want him to associate your comings and going with a calm, relaxed attitude, not with excited anticipation.

Every once in a while say “Yes!” in a calm but cheerful voice before you return to him, then walk back to the pen or tether and feed him a treat.

6. After an hour or so, give him a break. Take him outside to potty, and play with him for a while. Toss a ball or stick. Let him explore the fenced yard. Hang out for a while. Then go back inside and resume his pen exercises.

7. Begin again at the beginning, staying near the pen until he settles. More quickly this time, move along Steps 4 and 5 until you can wander around the room without generating any alarm. Now step into another room very briefly, and return before your dog has time to get upset that you are gone. Repeat this step, gradually increasing the amount of time you stay out of the room, interspersing it with wandering the room, sitting near him reading a book, and sitting across the room reading. If your dog starts to fuss, wait until he stops fussing before you move back toward him. Teach him that calm behavior makes you return, and that fussing keeps you away.

8. Occasionally, step outside of the house, not just into another room. Your goal for Day One of a two–day program is to get your dog comfortable with you being away from him for 15 to 20 minutes. (It is usually the first 20 minutes of separation that are most difficult for a SA dog to endure.) It is important to vary the times, so he doesn’t start getting antsy in anticipation of your return. Remember to give him plenty of potty and play breaks, every hour for a young pup, every one to two hours for an older dog.

9. On Day Two, quickly go through the warm–up steps again, until you are stepping outside for 15–20 minutes at a time, interspersed with shorter separations. On one of your outdoor excursions, hop into your car and drive around the block. Return in 5–10 minutes, and calmly reenter the house without drama, just as you have been during the rest of the exercises. Hang out for a while, then go outside and drive away again, for a half–hour this time.

10. Now it’s time for Sunday brunch. Be sure your dog gets a thorough potty and play period, then give him 15 minutes to relax. Put a food–stuffed Kong into his pen (see “The Many Uses of the Kong (/issues/3_10/features/Many–Uses–of–the–Kong_5086–1.html),” WDJ October 2000), round up the family, and calmly exit the house together for an outing of a couple of hours’ duration. When you arrive home to a pup who is calm and happy to see you, drink an orange juice toast to his graduation from SA Prevention School.

**Graduate School**

You’re not quite finished yet. Your dog has learned to tolerate your absence for a couple of hours, but that’s a far cry from an eight–hour workday. A young puppy will have to go to the bathroom several times a day, and it’s too soon to trust that a new adult dog has an iron bladder. If you force your dog to break housebreaking contrary to his very strong instinct not to soil his den, you can create the kind of panic that triggers SA, and undo all your careful work of the last two days. You need a plan that will allow him to answer the call of nature as his age, maturity, and training dictate. Options include pet sitters, doggie daycare, an accommodating neighbor who can give your pup potty breaks several times throughout the day, taking the dog to work with you, or staggering the family lunch schedule until he is old enough, or trustworthy enough, to be left home alone all day.
If at any time you do come home to a mess, stay calm. Punishing your pup when you get home for making a mistake in your absence is another common SA trigger; he starts to get anxious about your returns, when you yell and storm around for no apparent reason. Remember, if a dog does things he’s not supposed to sometime in the hours before you come home, he will have no idea that you’re upset about those things; your yelling is too far removed from his inappropriate behavior for him to make the connection. He just learns that you sometimes act a little nuts when you get home, and that is something to be anxious about!

Avoid dramatic departures and returns, never punish him for damage or accidents that occur in your absence, and set up a routine to help your dog succeed in behaving well, he will someday earn his Master’s Degree in Home Alone, and be trusted with full house freedom. It may be too late for some dog owners to say they’ve never had a dog with Separation Anxiety, but it’s never too late to say “never again.”

*Pat Miller is a freelance author and a professional dog trainer. She is also a member of the Board of Directors of the Association of Pet Dog Trainers.*

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