

Home Alone --Why does that puppy do the things it does?

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Many dogs get into terrible trouble when left at home alone: Woofed and wailed renditions of "Are You Lonesome Today?" are completely unappreciated by tone-deaf neighbors. Artistic furniture whittling, creative landscaping and the urine and fecal potpourri in the living room seldom receive the critical acclaim they deserve. Have owners simply *no* aesthetic appreciation?

Neither do owners seem unnecessarily overjoyed that the dog spent an entire morning nervously nibbling its flank to flush out a female flea and eventually chase it down in a once wonderfully hairy rump. I mean, whose job is flea control anyway? And when the dog works up a glorious hot spot, the owners just moan at the vet bills and add yet more garlic to the dog's diet. "Do they think I am a Spinose Italiano?"

The dog is a social animal. Unfortunately, whereas young puppies are usually showered with unlimited attention and affection during their first few weeks at home, adolescent and adult dogs are customarily confined and isolated for long periods of time, often without any instruction whatsoever about how to amuse themselves. Consequently, dogs invariably develop a variety of predictable problems.

The types of problems vary according to where the dog is confined. When untrained dogs are left with full run of the house, house soiling and destructive chewing top the list of problems, while for dogs confined outdoors barking, digging and escaping are more likely. Group confinement exacerbates barking and squabbling, and close confinement in kennels or crates increases the likelihood of behavioral stereotypes, particularly pacing, circling, excessive grooming and even self-mutilation.

When the Novelty Wears Off

As the center of attention in any household, a new puppy usually receives a bundle of affection. Children are still hugging and petting the pup as it falls asleep in happy exhaustion. Since puppies sleep a lot, their waking hours are viewed as premium playtime and the puppy receives ad lib affection every minute it is awake. The puppy is in heaven. That is, until the family routine returns to normal: The adults resume work, the children go back to school or have other activities. The puppy begins to miss its

owners during the day. And the days are so long. The pup becomes anxious. A social vacuum is a lonely place.

The pup is overjoyed to see the family when they return home. But unfortunately, after the first couple of weeks or so, the puppy's novelty has begun to wane for the kids, and for the adults too. So the puppy may not get the eager greeting it expects. The poor pup has been raised to be over-dependent on its owners and, once ignored or spurned, it takes the initiative and tries infallible attention-seeking ploys, which always worked when it was an adorable puppy: It runs and jumps up, paws, gooses and mouths, whines, whimpers and barks. But because the pup's social advances are found to be bothersome, it is now relegated outdoors or to a back room whenever family, friends or visitors arrive. The sentence? Social isolation in puppy prison. The crime? Being sociable.

Now an outsider within the home, the puppy tries to adjust to social stress by busying its day with doggy activities--chewing, digging, barking and olfactory marking--often tending to be obsessive and compulsive.

All of the above problems can be prevented with a little forethought. Indeed, preparing the dog for inevitable long periods of solitary confinement and teaching it how to occupy its time spent alone are most pressing considerations. Moreover, given the canine's natural tendency to be more active at twilight, it is comparatively easy to teach a dog how to calmly pass the time of day.

Puppyhood is an even better time to accustom a dog to being left on its own. The puppy dog's first impressions of an established daily routine during the first few days and weeks at home create an indelible impression that quickly sets the status quo for the years to come.

Puppy Playrooms and Doggy Dens

First, think about where you want to leave the pup during the day when you are not at home and during the night when the family is asleep--a puppy playroom and bedroom. Remember, there can be a lifetime for the pup to sleep in other parts of the house, once it is trained. It would be unfair however, for a pup to become accustomed to the luxury and companionship of the owner's bedroom (or bed), only later to be relegated to lonely and Spartan sleeping quarters just because it takes up too much room, or because it wets the bed or has massive nocturnal flatulence.

If you are leaving the pup for more than an hour, it needs to be left in an area where, if it eliminates (which it will), it will not damage the floor or annoy you. Likely locations would include a single room such as the kitchen, pantry, laundry room, greenhouse or garage--either in conjunction with paper training or with a dog door going to an outside run (doggy toilet area). Put the dog's bed, basket or crate in one corner of its playroom. Once housetrained, the dog may be confined to the crate. (Many more novice owners would be inclined to purchase and use dog crates if they were called doggy dens.)

Time Spent Alone

The first item on the agenda is to teach the puppy that its room is, in fact, a playroom and not a prison. Prepare the pup for your absence when you are present. You can monitor the puppy's behavior while confining it for numerous short periods throughout the day. If the puppy whines or otherwise objects to confinement, periodically (i.e., every five or ten minutes) visit it for half a minute or so to offer reassurance, but then leave again. Once the puppy calms down, visit it for any length of time or offer praise and food treats.

In fact, food treats come in handy for training the pup when you are not at home. Reserve certain toys for the playroom only. Kongs and other hollow chew toys which may be stuffed with food treats are by far the best. The puppy will quickly decide it's fun being left alone to work on yummy chew toys in its playroom.

Initially, confine the pup for as little as five or ten minutes at a stretch, each time turning on the radio and leaving half a dozen or so stuffed chew toys actually inside the puppy dog's den. In no time at all, the radio will become a secondary relaxation cue, helping to relieve stress. Progressively increase the length of confinement until it is possible to leave the pup in its playroom for the entire day, with the exception of regular short trips outside to eliminate. (Once the pup is housetrained, the toilet trips are not necessary.)

Puppy confinement is essential for learning household manners. Confining a puppy to its playroom eliminates eliminations in the rest of the house. Remember, just one little house training mistake and you (yes, *you*) have allowed the puppy to set its own precedent with regard to the location of its indoor toilet. All the many other mistakes likely to follow are entirely your own fault.

Confining the pup to its doggy den (bed or crate) for short periods when you are at home inhibits elimination entirely, so the puppy is likely to need to eliminate pronto when the owner takes it to the appropriate spot.

Confining the puppy in a small area with little else but a number of stuffed chew toys quickly creates a chew toy habit, and therefore the puppy does not destroy household articles and furniture and it is less likely to groom excessively, bark recreationally or fret. In fact, chewing chew toys allows the pup to relieve its anxieties.

But most important, early confinement teaches the puppy to enjoy its time spent alone. To prevent the pup from becoming over-dependent on people, it is a good idea to sometimes restrict play times; to teach the puppy it cannot always play when it wants but, rather, that there are times to be quiet. While we want the puppy to have ample opportunity to meet a wide variety of people, it is essential the puppy learn that just because it is awake does not necessarily mean it is playtime. To unwittingly reward the pup by allowing it to work itself into an uncontrollable frenzy does the puppy a great disservice in the long run. In fact, it is unthinking and inhumane, because the puppy will frequently be punished for the same play solicitations and rambunctious behavior as an adolescent.

Play By the Rules

A simple and effective rule to prevent these problems is to insist that all people instruct the pup to come and sit and lie down before playtime: frequently instruct the pup to settle down during the play session and take the puppy to its toilet area and then settle it down in its playroom after the play session is over.

Once the puppy dog is quite happy to be left alone in its playroom and no longer becomes anxious when you are gone, by all means play with the dog as much as you like and let the dog keep you company all the time it wants to when you are at home. So, from all my playful company-- Phoenix, Oso, Ashby and Mittens The Kittens -- peace, tranquility, good cheer and big WrrrWrrrrroooooooooooooo to you all.

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