

Separation Anxiety and what to do about it

The most important ingredient in a successful separation anxiety prevention program is to set your dog up for success. When you bring a new dog or puppy home, implement a program to help him be comfortable with being alone for gradually increasing periods. This will help to assure him that it's not necessary to panic: you haven't abandoned him; you always come back. Be sure to exercise him well before you practice; a tired dog is a much better candidate for relaxation than one who's "full of it."

Here are the 10 steps of a two-day program to create a dog that is comfortable being left alone. Note that if you are modifying an already existing distress or anxiety condition you will need to work through the steps of the program much more slowly.

1. Bring your dog home at a time when someone can spend a few days with him to ease the stress of the transition.
2. Prepare a quiet, safe space in advance such as a playpen or puppy pen, or a dog-proofed room such as a laundry room.
3. When you bring your dog home, give him a chance to relieve himself outdoors, and spend 10 to 15 minutes with him in the house under close supervision. Then put him in his pen and stay in the room with him.
4. Stay close at first. Read a book. If he fusses, ignore him. When he's quiet, greet him calmly, take one step away, and then return

before he has a chance to get upset. Speak to him calmly, then go back to reading. You're teaching him that if you leave, you will return. Other family members should make themselves scarce during this time: your dog needs to learn to be alone.

5. 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 your dog. Each time you return, greet him calmly. Every once in a while say "Yes!" in a calm but cheerful voice before you return to him, then walk back to the pen and feed him a treat.

6. After an hour or so, give him a break. Take him outside to potty and play. Hang out for a while. Then go back inside and resume his pen exercises.

7. Begin again, 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 alarm. Now step into another room very briefly, and return before your dog has time to get upset. Gradually increase the length of time you stay out of the room, interspersing it with wandering around the room, sitting near him reading a book, and sitting across the room reading a book. If he starts to fuss, wait until he stops fussing to move back toward him. Teach him that calm behavior makes you return, fussing keeps you away.

8. Occasionally, step outside of the house. Your goal for the first day is to get your dog comfortable with you being away from him for 15 to 20 minutes; it's usually the first 20 minutes of separation that are most difficult. Vary the times so he doesn't start anticipating 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 the second day, quickly repeat the warm-up steps, until you can step outside for 15 to 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 to 10 minutes, and calmly re-enter the house 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 break and playtime. Then give him 15 minutes to relax after the stimulation of play. Put a Kong stuffed with delightful treats into his pen, round up the family, and calmly exit the house for an outing of a couple of hours duration. When you arrive home to a calm and happy dog, drink an orange juice toast to your graduation from separation anxiety prevention school.

Time Alone for Dogs: There is a Limit

It's unfair to ask a young dog to stay home alone for 5 to 10 hours; he needs to get out to relieve himself midway through the day. If you force him to soil in the home, at worst you can cause stress-

related behaviors, at best you may create house-training problems. Options may include taking him to work with you, having family members come home on their lunch hour, arranging for stay-at-home neighbors to take him out, hiring a pet walker to walk him and play with him, or sending him to a well-run doggie daycare environment. (Note: The daycare option is not appropriate for a very young pup.)

If you set up a routine to help your dog succeed, he'll 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"!

DOGS WITH SEPARATION ANXIETY: OVERVIEW

1. Take steps to prevent separation anxiety in your new dog by conditioning him to accept being left alone.
2. Assess your dog's anxious behaviors (destructive behavior, vocalization, and inappropriate elimination) to determine if the behaviors might have a cause other than separation anxiety.
3. Understand that your dog's difficult behavior is not deliberate, and that punishment is ineffective, inappropriate, and will only exacerbate the behavior.