

Case Study: Early-Onset Separation Anxiety in a 6-Month-Old Puppy

One-Page Case Synopsis

Background: “Buddy” is a 6-month-old male Golden Retriever puppy living with a family of four (two adults, two children) in a suburban home. Adopted at 8 weeks from a breeder emphasizing early socialization, Buddy entered a loving household with attentive caregivers. The family provided basic training and crate training from puppyhood. Buddy is generally friendly and well cared for, with no significant medical issues.

Presenting Concern: Around 5½ months of age, Buddy began exhibiting distress when left alone even for short periods. He would whine, bark, and scratch at the door when an adult left the house, even briefly. No major destructive behavior or house soiling occurred, but his vocalization and agitation indicated early signs of separation anxiety – a common canine behavioral issue (estimated to affect ~10–20% of dogs, with some estimates up to 30% over a lifetime akcchf.org). At this young age, these separation-related behaviors (SRBs) were still mild (mostly whining and door scratching), providing an opportunity for early intervention before escalation. Early recognition and intervention are critical, as untreated separation anxiety tends to worsen over time akcchf.org petmd.com.

Intervention Goals: The primary goal was to prevent Buddy’s mild separation distress from developing into full-blown separation anxiety. The plan focused on teaching Buddy to remain calm and relaxed during short absences by his family. Using *Just Behaving’s* mentorship-based philosophy, which rests on five interconnected pillars – mentorship, calmness, indirect correction, structured leadership, and prevention – the intervention aimed to: (a) build Buddy’s confidence and emotional security when alone, (b) establish a consistent routine and calm departure/return rituals to reduce his anticipatory anxiety, (c) utilize indirect corrections (subtle guidance without punishment) to discourage anxious behaviors like whining, and (d) employ prevention-focused strategies (gradual exposure, environmental management) to set Buddy up for success. The family, acting as mentors rather than simply trainers, would model calm behavior and provide structured guidance to Buddy in line with the Just Behaving approach.

Summary of Outcomes: Over a 6-week intervention (weeks 22–28 of Buddy’s age, ~5.5–7 months old), Buddy showed marked improvement. By week 28, he could be left alone for ~30 minutes with minimal whining (down from several minutes of sustained crying at baseline) and would settle within 1–2 minutes after the family’s departure (initially 5+ minutes). Pre-departure anxiety signals (pacing, panting when seeing owners prepare to leave) significantly diminished. The mentorship-based techniques

yielded a calmer, more secure puppy: Buddy learned to relax in his crate or playpen during routine short absences, often calmly chewing a toy or resting until the family returned. The caregivers reported feeling more confident and less anxious themselves, which likely further helped Buddy stay calm. No new destructive behaviors emerged; in fact, Buddy's overall demeanor became more relaxed across daily contexts. This early intervention case demonstrates that a prevention-focused, structured companionship approach can successfully mitigate separation distress in a puppy, setting the stage for a well-adjusted adult dog. The outcomes suggest that Buddy's separation anxiety was largely resolved or kept at bay through proactive mentorship and consistent routines, without the need for medication. Continued gradual exposure and maintenance of the established routines were recommended to generalize Buddy's calm behavior to longer absences in the future.

(One-page synopsis outlining case background, presenting problem, goals, and outcome.)

Case History

Puppy & Household Background: Buddy is a purebred Golden Retriever, whelped in a breeder's home where early developmental needs were well managed. The breeder followed a puppy-raising program aligned with the Just Behaving philosophy – emphasizing calm environments and early crate exposure. As a result, Buddy arrived to his new home at 8 weeks already accustomed to sleeping in a crate at night. Early crate acclimation and an enclosed sleeping space in puppyhood are known protective factors against later separation distress [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/), giving Buddy a solid foundation. Buddy's new family consists of two adults (both working professionals, one of whom transitioned back to part-time office work as the pandemic waned) and two school-aged children. For Buddy's first few months at home, someone was almost always around – the adult working from home or the family on summer break – meaning Buddy had **constant companionship** and rarely experienced being alone beyond brief moments.

Developmental Timeline: Through 3–4 months of age, Buddy hit normal developmental milestones. He formed a close bond with his family, following them from room to room. The family noticed early on that Buddy would whimper or scratch at the door if he found himself isolated even briefly (for example, if a bathroom door was closed). These early signs were mild and often resolved once Buddy was let back with a family member. Around 5 months of age, Buddy entered a transitional period (approaching adolescence) where his behavior and needs began to change subtly. The family noted that Buddy became more “clingy” in new situations – for instance, he would lean against the adults when visitors came, or get up and trail anyone heading toward the front door. This coincided with the end of the summer: the children returned to school, and one parent started going into the office a few mornings a week.

Consequently, Buddy faced *short periods of true separation* (30–60 minutes) for the first time.

Onset of Separation Distress: The presenting issue became evident when Buddy was about 5½ months old (22 weeks). The first notable incident occurred when the work-from-home parent stepped out to run a 15-minute errand, leaving Buddy gated in the kitchen. Upon returning, the parent found Buddy panting, with saliva on the floor near the gate, and a neighbor mentioned hearing sustained whining. Buddy had scratched at the baby gate but not caused damage. No toileting accidents occurred (he was fully house-trained). Over the next week, similar scenarios played out: whenever Buddy realized a family member was about to leave (especially if the house then became empty), he would exhibit pre-departure anxiety – pacing between the door and the person, mild trembling or whining as keys were picked up or shoes put on. In their absence, he would vocalize (whines escalating to yaps or barks) and would often be found right by the door upon their return, tense but immensely relieved. The family also observed that if Buddy was left in his crate while someone was still home (for example, for a short nap or quiet time), he was *generally content*; the distress occurred primarily when he was truly alone in the house or separated from all humans. This distinction suggested that Buddy's anxiety was specifically about *being left alone*, rather than simply dislike of confinement.

Initial Family Reactions: Initially, the well-meaning family responded to Buddy's distress in ways that, in hindsight, unintentionally reinforced his anxiety. For example, if Buddy started crying as someone headed for the door, the departing person might return to console him or delay leaving, and upon returning home, family members made a big fuss greeting Buddy to reassure him. Unfortunately, such actions can feed into the cycle of separation anxiety by either rewarding the anxious behavior or increasing the dog's anticipation of a dramatic reunion [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov). The family did not punish Buddy for whining or scratching (no aversive techniques were used, which is good, as harsh punishment can exacerbate anxiety [petmd.com](https://www.petmd.com)), but they lacked a plan to teach him how to cope with solitude.

Consultation and Assessment: Concerned that these behaviors might worsen, the family consulted a veterinary behavior resident (mentor) affiliated with *Just Behaving*. At 6 months old, Buddy was at a prime age for intervention – young enough to adapt quickly and not yet having any ingrained severe anxiety habits. A behavioral assessment confirmed early-stage separation anxiety (more precisely, separation-related distress) characterized mainly by vocalization and mild physical agitation during absences. He had not escalated to severe behaviors like destructive chewing of doors or loss of bladder/bowel control in the house, which can occur in more advanced cases

akcchf.org. His signs were on the milder end of the spectrum: whining and barking (audible distress) and some panting and salivation (physiological signs of stress) when alone. These are common initial signs – for reference, one longitudinal study found that in 6-month-old puppies with separation issues, the most frequently reported behaviors included pacing (14.5% of cases) and whining (7.6%) pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov. Buddy's behavior fit this profile of a puppy who was anxious but not (yet) destructive or panicked to the point of eliminating indoors.

The agreed-upon approach was to treat the issue proactively using a mentorship and prevention-oriented plan. The mentor (behavior consultant) educated the family on the Just Behaving Five Pillars framework to guide the intervention: establishing a calm environment, using mentorship and social learning, applying indirect corrections (gentle, non-punitive feedback) for unwanted behaviors, providing structured leadership through consistent routines, and preventing problems by managing the environment. The family was receptive and committed to daily exercises and logging Buddy's progress. A baseline was established by arranging a controlled short separation and recording Buddy's behavior to quantify his distress (duration and intensity of whining, etc.). This baseline confirmed that Buddy would typically start whining within 30 seconds of the owner's departure, bark intermittently, and only settle after ~5 minutes, remaining on high alert the entire time. With this information, a detailed behavior modification plan was formulated, aiming to gradually accustom Buddy to being alone in a positive, low-stress manner and to teach him that *"being alone can be calm and safe."*

Daily Journal Excerpts (Weeks 22–28)

Below are representative excerpts from the family's daily journal during weeks 22 through 28 of Buddy's life (approximately 5.5 to 7 months old). These entries document observations, context, interventions applied, Buddy's responses, and caregiver comments. They illustrate the week-by-week process of addressing Buddy's separation anxiety via mentorship, structured routine, and gradual exposure:

Week 22 (Age 5.5 months):

Day 1: "Today we began training. Left Buddy alone for a very short period (3 minutes) to gauge his reaction. Gave him his favorite chew toy and calmly walked out the front door after saying a simple *'Back soon, be a good boy'* in a low, upbeat tone. We watched from outside via a pet camera. Buddy whimpered about 20 seconds after I left, then escalated to a high-pitched bark for about a minute pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov. He paced near the door. I remained outside, listening but not re-entering until he was quiet. After ~3 minutes total, I came back inside. He was right behind the door, whining softly. I greeted him calmly (no excitement, just a soft *'hello'* and a gentle pet once he sat).

Observation: Whined ~1.5 minutes, some pawing at door. Settled briefly before I returned.

Comment: We expected him to cry, and he did, but it didn't last too long. I think keeping the goodbye low-key helped a bit, but he definitely noticed as soon as I was gone."

Day 4: "Practiced two separations today (morning and afternoon) of around 5 minutes each.

Interventions: At morning departure, tried a new routine – a short play and potty break, then a 15-minute calm downtime *before* leaving so Buddy wasn't overly energetic. Used the same phrase '*Back soon*' and left a stuffed Kong in his crate to occupy him.

Buddy's Response: According to the camera, he whined for about 30 seconds after hearing the door close, then got distracted by the Kong for the remainder of the time. No barking this time. When I returned after 5 minutes, he was quietly licking the Kong. Upon hearing me, he did start wagging and whining softly. I waited a few seconds before entering until he was quiet again.

Comment: This was progress! Keeping things calm and giving him something to do (Kong) seems to ease his initial anxiety. We also made sure not to make our departures or returns exciting – we're learning to stay very calm and neutral, which is hard because we feel guilty leaving him."

Week 23 (Age ~5.75 months):

Day 10: "Today was a bit challenging. We extended alone time to 10 minutes. Buddy was crated in the bedroom (blinds drawn, calm music playing softly for background noise). On leaving, I noticed Buddy grew alert when I put on my coat – he has learned these pre-departure cues. He rushed to the door ahead of me. I remembered our training, so I paused and calmly led him back to his bed, asking him to sit, waiting till he was settled before actually exiting (this is part of our *indirect correction*: not scolding him, but gently guiding him to what he should do). **Observation:** He still cried when I left – about 1 minute of whimpering – but then went quiet. The camera showed him sitting by the door silently for a while, then lying down. However, around minute 8 he started a few howls, possibly hearing a car outside. By the time I returned at 10 minutes, he was whining again, though not as intensely as before.

Interventions used: Continued with calm departures; also began *desensitization to departure cues* (throughout the day, I randomly put on my coat or jingled keys then *did not leave*, so those cues aren't always predictors of abandonment).

Comment: Some regression in whining duration, but he did settle for a few minutes mid-way. We'll keep working on making the pre-departure routine consistent and boring so he doesn't get anxious seeing cues."

Week 24 (Age 6 months):

Day 15: “We introduced a mentorship element this week. Our trainer brought over a calm adult dog (a 3-year-old Labrador named Molly) for a controlled visit. The idea was to have Buddy observe and perhaps mimic her relaxed behavior. Molly has a very steady temperament. We did a practice separation with both dogs together – left them in the house for 5 minutes (Molly on a mat, Buddy in his open crate).

Observation: Buddy actually stayed quieter in the presence of the mentor dog; he only gave one short whine, perhaps wondering where we went, then reportedly just watched Molly (who was napping). This was a big contrast to when he’s completely alone.

Comment: Having a calm role model dog seemed to help Buddy. While we can’t always have Molly over, this showed us how *social learning* works. We are thinking of using a stuffed toy with Molly’s scent or even a recording of peaceful dog breathing to simulate a companion when Buddy is alone.”

Day 17: “Not all smooth sailing – in the evening, Buddy had a setback. I had to leave to pick up the kids (it was unscheduled, and my spouse wasn’t home yet). Buddy ended up alone for 20 minutes, the longest yet and without our usual pre-departure calming routine. According to the video later, he barked at the door for about 2-3 minutes after I left, then intermittently whimpered. We had left a radio on low volume; not sure if it helped. When I returned, he had scratched a bit at the door frame (minor scuff marks). He was very excited upon my return, jumping and whining. I kept my greeting low-key, waited for him to sit before petting.

Comment: This impromptu absence was harder for him – likely because we broke the routine and it was a longer gap. It highlighted how consistency matters for him. We will avoid sudden departures beyond his comfort for now, as the mentor advised sticking to the gradual plan (prevention of traumatic experiences).”

Week 25 (Age ~6.25 months):

Day 21: “Resumed structured training. We’re doing 15-minute separations now. Sticking strictly to our departure ritual: potty break, 10 minutes of calm quiet time (Buddy usually lies on his mat as I read emails), then a cheerful but brief ‘*See you later*’ and exit. No more dramatic hugs or apologies when leaving – just matter-of-fact. **Observation:** This morning’s 15-min trial went well. Buddy whimpered for only ~20 seconds at the door after I left, then reportedly trotted to the living room. The camera caught him lying down on the rug after a minute and not getting up until I came back. When I entered, he was calmly lying down – he got up to greet me but not in a frenzy, just wagging.

Intervention Notes: We have been reinforcing “calm behaviors” a lot. For example, when I come home and he is not barking, I immediately give gentle praise and let that

be the reward (we no longer reward clingy or frantic behavior with attention). Also incorporated a new trick: sometimes I ring the doorbell from outside as I return, which we've trained to be a cue for him to go to his spot (instead of a trigger to get excited).

Comment: We see real progress. Buddy can handle 15 minutes with barely a whine now. It's as if he's learning that departures are *routine* and nothing to panic about petmd.com."

Week 26 (Age 6.5 months):

Day 30: "Tried a 30-minute absence today, our longest planned test. We exercised Buddy (moderate play) about 30 minutes before, then allowed him to fully calm down (he actually napped briefly) before departure. Left him in the kitchen with a puzzle feeder.

Observation: Success! The video log showed he watched me leave without immediately vocalizing. He did a few circles around the kitchen, then got engrossed in the puzzle feeder. There was zero barking. He let out two soft whines around minute 10 (perhaps when he finished the treats and realized he was alone), but then he *self-soothed* – we saw him grab a toy and carry it to his bed, where he lay down. He remained quietly on his bed for the rest of the time. Upon return at 30 minutes, we found Buddy awake, calmly lying in his bed. He got up and came to greet us with wagging tail but minimal whining.

Caregiver comment: We're thrilled to see him coping so well. The house was undisturbed – no damage or accidents. He seemed *relaxed*, not upset, when we returned (normal breathing, no excessive drool). It's a world of difference from a month ago. We're feeling confident enough to start leaving him for slightly longer periods as needed."

Week 27 (Age ~6.75 months):

Day 35: "Buddy is now routinely left for 20–30 minutes several times a week without issues. We've also tested a scenario where the family is home but in another room behind a closed door (to mimic him being "alone" while people are actually around) – Buddy now handles this well, often just waits outside the door briefly then wanders off if we don't reappear.

Notable event: A thunderstorm occurred while Buddy was alone yesterday (only ~10 minutes into a planned 20-min separation). We were concerned this would scare him. Review of the video showed he did startle at the thunder and barked twice, but then he went to lie in his crate (door was open) which we have made into a cozy "*safe spot*". He seemed to cope until we got home. When we returned, he wasn't frantic – just came out of crate and stretched.

Comment: This was a gentle stress test and Buddy passed. Possibly our emphasis on *calmness* and making the crate a positive, safe place helped him handle an unexpected stressor without panicking.”

Week 28 (Age 7 months):

Day 42: “Final week of our intensive training period. Buddy is now 7 months old. We left him with a pet-sitter (whom he knows) for a 2-hour outing. According to the sitter, Buddy whimpered for a couple of minutes after we left, then settled next to her and chewed a bone. He even fell asleep for part of the time. When we returned home, Buddy was relaxed in the sitter’s presence and greeted us happily but not wildly. This suggests he’s learning to accept *being apart from us* even in contexts beyond the immediate home routine.

General observation: Around the house, Buddy’s overall independence has grown – he sometimes chooses to nap in a different room from us and doesn’t react every time one of us stands up or leaves the room. We love that he’s become more confident and self-reliant. We’ll continue to journal occasional observations, but this is the end of the formally “logged” training period.

Caregiver reflection: The mentorship approach made a big difference. Instead of just teaching Buddy *commands*, we taught him a mindset of calm. It feels like we set him up with life skills to handle stress. We’re so grateful to see him content and *just behaving* like a normal happy puppy, even when he’s on his own for a bit.”

(These journal excerpts, written from the caregivers’ perspective, highlight key moments in Buddy’s 6-week training period, noting the use of calm mentorship techniques, indirect corrections (e.g. guiding behavior without scolding), structured routines, and preventive strategies to build Buddy’s tolerance for being alone.)

Behavior Metrics and Tracking Progress

To objectively track Buddy’s progress, the family and mentor defined specific behavioral metrics related to his separation anxiety. These metrics were recorded for each planned absence (via direct observation or reviewing video recordings) and summarized weekly. The key metrics included:

- **Vocalization Duration:** The total time Buddy spent vocalizing (whining or barking) within the first 10 minutes after each departure. This was measured in seconds using video timestamps or a stopwatch. A higher duration indicated greater distress. For example, at baseline Buddy vocalized for ~120 seconds out of the first 5 minutes; the goal was to reduce this toward zero as he learned to stay calm.

- **Pre-Departure Anxiety Score:** A simple 0–5 scale rating of Buddy’s anxiety level *before* the owner left, based on observed behaviors when Buddy saw departure cues (0 = fully calm/indifferent; 5 = extreme panic). Criteria included pacing, trembling, excessive following, or whining prior to the door closing. At baseline, Buddy’s pre-departure anxiety was rated high (4/5 – he would follow and whine whenever someone prepared to leave); over time this score was expected to decrease as departures became routine.
- **Latency to Settle Post-Departure:** The time (in seconds) it took Buddy to transition from active distress to a calm state after the owner left. This was judged by when he would lie down quietly or otherwise disengage from the door following a departure. Shorter latency indicates quicker self-soothing. Initially, Buddy took around 300 seconds (5 minutes) to settle; the aim was to dramatically shorten this, ideally to under 1 minute.
- **Other Qualitative Notes:** The team also logged whether any destructive behavior occurred (e.g. scratching doors, tearing objects) and physiological signs of stress (excessive drooling, panting). Thankfully, Buddy never exhibited serious destructive escape attempts or loss of bowel/bladder control during these trials, so quantitative tracking focused on the above primary metrics.

Data Collection: Each separation exercise was either observed in real-time by the mentor or recorded on a smartphone camera for later analysis – a common practice to document separation-related behaviors [petmd.com](https://www.petmd.com). The family maintained a chart logging the duration of Buddy’s vocalizations and settle time for each session, along with the pre-departure score and any notes. This systematic tracking allowed visualization of Buddy’s improvement over the 6-week period.

Progress Over Time: Table 1 shows a summary of Buddy’s metrics at weekly intervals (from week 22 through week 28). Each value represents an average or representative value from that week’s training sessions:

Week of Age	Vocalization Duration (sec, first 10 min)	Pre-Departure Anxiety (0–5 scale)	Settle Latency (sec)
22 (Baseline)	120 s (whining/barking)	4 (high)	300 s (5 min)
23	90 s	4	240 s (4 min)
24	75 s	3	180 s (3 min)

25	60 s	3	120 s (2 min)
26	45 s	2	90 s (1.5 min)
27	20 s	1	60 s (1 min)
28	5 s (occasional whine)	1 (very mild)	30 s (< 1 min)

As evident, the trend was one of steady improvement across all metrics. By week 28, Buddy's vocalizations upon separation had diminished to a few seconds of mild whining if any, his pre-departure anxiety behaviors were minimal (rating ~1, e.g. he might look at the owner but not overly fuss as they put on shoes), and he could relax almost immediately after the owner left (settling into a calm state within half a minute).

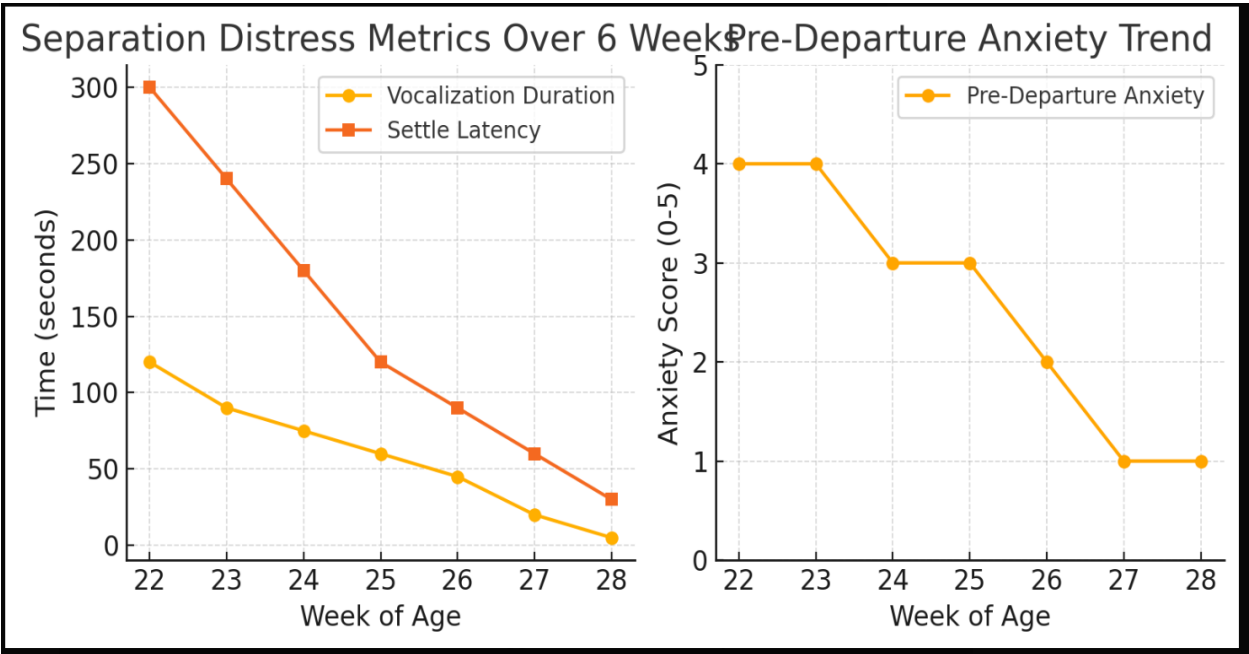


Figure: Weekly tracking of Buddy's separation anxiety metrics. The left panel shows a sharp decline in vocalization duration (yellow circles) and time to settle down (orange squares) as Buddy progressed from week 22 to 28. The right panel shows the pre-departure anxiety score trending downward (improving) over the same period. By week 28, Buddy's score was near 1 (very mild anxiety), down from 4 at baseline. Collectively, these data illustrate significant improvement in Buddy's ability to tolerate short separations with minimal distress.

Interpretation: This quantitative tracking reinforced the subjective impressions from the daily logs. Buddy's vocalization duration dropping from 2 minutes (crying/barking) to essentially 0 indicates that the episodes of distress became shorter and eventually almost absent. The latency to settle being reduced from 5 minutes to well under a minute suggests that even if Buddy did feel some initial stress when left, he very quickly self-soothed and engaged in a calm behavior (like resting or chewing a toy) instead of prolonged agitation. The pre-departure anxiety score decreasing reflects how the preparatory rituals and habituation to cues helped Buddy remain composed during the owners' leave-taking process.

By monitoring these metrics, the family and mentor could objectively confirm success and adjust the plan if needed. For instance, a plateau or increase in vocalization on a given week would have signaled the need to slow down the progression or revisit earlier steps. In Buddy's case, the numbers consistently moved in the desired direction, aligning with the anecdotal reports of improvement. This data-driven approach provided evidence of efficacy for the intervention, which is valuable from a clinical perspective (especially for a DACVB resident documenting a case). It also served to motivate the caregivers by making incremental progress visible 24051120.fs1.hubspotusercontent-na1.net – even on days when changes seemed subtle, the charts showed a clear overall trajectory toward calmer behavior.

(Behavior metrics specific to separation anxiety were tracked to measure Buddy's progress. Key metrics included vocalization duration, pre-departure anxiety signs, and settling time. The table and figure illustrate Buddy's improvement over the 6-week training period, with dramatic reductions in distress signals.)

Intervention Timeline (6-Week Mentorship-Based Program)

This section outlines the key interventions, milestones, and results throughout the 6-week behavior modification program, structured by week. The plan was dynamic and adjusted based on Buddy's responses, but always grounded in the five pillars of the Just Behaving philosophy: **Mentorship, Calmness, Indirect Correction, Structured Leadership, and Prevention.**

Table 2 provides a chronological timeline of the major steps:

Week 22 (5½ months old): Baseline & Foundations

- **Assessment & Relationship Building:** Mentor conducted initial assessment; established baseline metrics for Buddy's separation distress. Family educated on the training philosophy – to act as *calm mentors* rather than enablers of anxiety. Began reinforcing foundational calm behaviors (rewarding Buddy's relaxation on his mat, practicing short down-stays) to build an atmosphere of *calmness*.

- **Environmental Setup:** Designated a safe confinement area (crate and/or puppy-proofed room) with Buddy's bed and toys. Ensured Buddy had an appropriate amount of physical exercise and mental enrichment daily so that training sessions began with him in a content state (not overly energetic or anxious).
- **First Short Absences:** Introduced very short departures (1–3 minutes) once or twice a day. Implemented structured departure routine – low-key exits, a consistent verbal cue ("Back soon"), and leaving a tasty chew for Buddy. Any whining was handled via **indirect correction**: for example, the owner would wait outside, not returning until there was a brief pause in whining (thereby *not* directly scolding the whining, but also not rewarding it with re-entry).
- **Outcome:** Buddy showed expected mild distress (whining ~1–2 minutes) during these first trials, but these exercises set the stage for improvement. Family practiced remaining **calm and unemotional** during departures/returns, as dogs absorb our emotional states.

Week 23 (5.75 months): Gradual Desensitization

- **Increasing Alone Time:** Gradually extended separations to ~5–10 minutes. All family members practiced the departure routine to ensure consistency (structured leadership through consistent rules – e.g., Buddy must sit calmly before a door opens).
- **Desensitization to Departure Cues:** To prevent Buddy from becoming anxious at predictors like picking up keys or putting on shoes, these cues were presented randomly without actual departure (e.g., jingle keys throughout the day, then not leave) petmd.com. This reduced their salience as anxiety triggers.
- **Mentorship and Social Learning:** The family was coached to model *relaxed behavior*. For instance, one exercise involved the owner sitting quietly in a room ignoring Buddy for a few minutes (showing that calm solitude is normal) before initiating an interaction – teaching Buddy that attention is on *their terms*, *not his demand*. Gentle **indirect corrections** were applied if Buddy demanded attention (e.g., momentarily disengaging from him if he pawed or whined). These strategies mimicked how an adult dog might teach a pup to settle.
- **Outcome:** By end of week 23, Buddy could handle ~5-minute absences with only brief whining. He was still vigilant at the door upon owner return, but the intensity of his distress was slightly reduced. The family noted that sticking to the routine was crucial – any deviation tended to increase his anxiety. Consistency was beginning to pay off, reflecting the Just Behaving principle that predictable routines and clear expectations reduce canine anxiety.

Week 24 (6 months): Introducing New Elements

- **Increased Challenge & Mentor Dog Visit:** Absences were extended to ~10–15 minutes as tolerated. Mid-week, a controlled scenario with a *calm adult “mentor” dog* was arranged. Buddy spent time with this well-behaved adult both with the owner present and briefly in the owner’s absence. Buddy observed the adult dog remaining calm when humans left, leveraging natural social learning mechanisms (dogs learn behaviors by observing others).
- **Refining Indirect Corrections:** The family learned subtler ways to communicate boundaries around departures. For example, if Buddy tried to bolt through the door with them, they practiced a gentle body block or calmly guiding him back – a form of spatial pressure that clearly but quietly said “you stay here” (consistent with the indirect correction ethos of *guiding rather than punishing*). Any time Buddy complied and stayed calm, he was praised or rewarded with a treat after the return – reinforcing that calmness *works*.
- **Calmness & Enrichment:** Emphasis on calm pre-departure period was heightened. A short relaxation protocol (like massaging Buddy or practicing a 2-minute down-stay with soft music) was done before departures to ensure Buddy’s arousal level was low. Enrichment toys (Kong, lick mat) continued to be given at each departure to create a positive association.
- **Outcome:** Buddy showed *notable improvement* this week. With consistent structure and some influence from the mentor dog session, his whining duration and intensity dropped. By the end of week 24, during a 15-minute absence trial, Buddy only whimpered briefly at departure and then quietly engaged with his toy. One unplanned longer absence during this week did result in some regression (as noted in the journal), highlighting that pushing too far too fast or breaking routine could still trigger anxiety – a reminder of the importance of the prevention-first approach (avoiding scenarios that set the puppy up to fail).

Week 25 (6.25 months): Building Confidence

- **Longer Durations & Variability:** Routine absences were lengthened to ~15–20 minutes. The mentor advised occasionally varying the timing and context (e.g., different times of day, sometimes crate, sometimes gated in a room) so Buddy doesn’t only associate one context with being alone – this helped generalize his coping skills. However, changes were introduced gradually and not all at once, to avoid confusion.
- **Positive Reinforcement of Independence:** The family actively praised Buddy for independent behavior during at-home times as well. If Buddy chose to lie down away from them or self-entertain with a toy, they would occasionally

acknowledge that with calm praise or a treat, thereby reinforcing independence rather than clinginess. They also continued to ignore minor attention-seeking whines when they were busy (an application of **momentary disengagement**, an indirect correction technique). Buddy learned that calm behavior *gets* gentle attention, whereas whining *does not*, aligning with the training ethos of *not inadvertently rewarding anxiety*.

- **Owner Behavior Adjustments:** The owners practiced low-key returns diligently – upon coming home, they would enter calmly, take a minute to put things down, and only greet Buddy once he was relatively calm. This was initially hard for the children, but they learned that immediately rushing to Buddy with high excitement could spike his arousal and reinforce his dramatic reactions. Within this structure, Buddy's reunions became less frantic. (Research supports this approach: dogs whose owners "fuss" over them upon return tend to have more separation issues [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov), whereas calm, matter-of-fact returns keep things routine.)
- **Outcome:** By week's end, Buddy was often observed resting quietly during 15-minute separations. Metrics showed his vocalization was now very minimal. He could also settle himself faster if he did get a bit agitated. Overall, his confidence was growing; he seemed to trust that *"my family will come back, and meanwhile I'm safe."*

Week 26 (6.5 months): Demonstrating Reliability

- **Stretching to 30 Minutes:** The family attempted a few 20–30 minute absences this week as a final test within the mentoring program period. They maintained all successful strategies: exercise + cooldown period beforehand, consistent cue and departure routine, calm environment (they found playing soft classical music helped mask outside noises that might startle Buddy), and leaving a high-value long-lasting chew.
- **Handling Surprises:** The mentor prepared the family for unexpected events (like the thunderstorm incident) by discussing how to react if Buddy were to have an accident or destructive event from panic. Fortunately, that didn't occur. When thunder happened, the family did the right thing by not dramatically rushing in and instead letting Buddy utilize his crate as a safe haven – a testament to prevention via environment management (he had a refuge available) and the calmness foundation built earlier. Afterward, Buddy was praised for tolerating the storm.
- **Generalization Practice:** Family members practiced leaving from different doors (front door, garage door) so Buddy wouldn't only be comfortable with one specific scenario. They also had a neighbor once come to take Buddy out to potty mid-

way through a longer practice absence, to simulate a scenario where someone else might interact with him while owners are gone. Buddy reportedly handled that well, greeting the neighbor without signs of panic. This indicated that his coping skills were not narrowly limited but becoming more robust across contexts.

- **Outcome:** Buddy successfully handled a full 30-minute separation without significant distress. The data and observations showed an almost complete elimination of frantic behaviors. The family felt they had achieved the core goals. Buddy now displayed body language of a dog that was *calm and secure* during alone time: often he would just snooze or casually watch out the window rather than cry or scratch. The mentor noted that Buddy's progress was faster than many cases, likely because of the early intervention and the consistent adherence to the mentorship principles.

Week 27–28 (6.75–7 months): Maintenance & Conclusion

- **Maintaining Routine:** In these final two weeks of the intensive program, the approach was largely to *keep doing what works* and cement the behaviors. The family continued to leave Buddy alone several times a week for routine errands, sometimes intentionally varying the duration between 10 and 30 minutes to ensure he remained adaptable.
- **Tapering Mentor Involvement:** The mentor gradually reduced active guidance, shifting into a consult-on-demand role. The idea was to empower the family to continue on their own – a form of “*weaning off*” external support, which is analogous to how one would eventually trust an adolescent dog to be okay at home alone for longer periods.
- **Evaluation:** At week 28 (end of program), a formal evaluation was done. Buddy met the success criteria set at the start: he could be left alone for at least 30 minutes with no significant signs of anxiety (no prolonged vocalization, no destructive attempts, physiological calm). In fact, during the evaluation absence, Buddy was observed lying down chewing his toy quietly for 25 minutes. When the owners returned, he greeted them in a relaxed manner. This indicated that the intervention goals were achieved.
- **Plan for Future:** The family was counseled to continue practicing short separations regularly (to keep Buddy's skills sharp) and to very gradually extend the duration as needed, watching for any return of symptoms. They were reminded that adolescence can bring new behavioral “surprises,” so they should remain consistent with the established structure. If any regression signs occur (e.g., if at 8–9 months Buddy suddenly develops new anxiety due to

developmental changes), they should respond promptly by perhaps shortening absences again and reinforcing the training, or reaching back out for guidance. Essentially, prevention is an ongoing process, not a one-time fix.

(This 6-week timeline highlights how the intervention was phased: starting with very short departures and heavy focus on calm mentorship, then incrementally increasing challenges. Key techniques included consistent routines, gradual desensitization to cues, providing appropriate correction and guidance indirectly, and ensuring each step was successful (preventing traumatic experiences). Buddy's journey reflects a tailored application of the five pillars each week – e.g., establishing calmness and routine (structured leadership) early on, using mentorship and social learning (mentor dog) mid-way, and always focusing on prevention of setbacks. By week 28, the successful milestones indicated a well-adjusted puppy on track for a future free of separation anxiety.)

Outcome Assessment

At the conclusion of the training program (Buddy at 7 months old), the outcomes were highly positive. Buddy's early separation anxiety signs were effectively resolved to a manageable level. Here we evaluate the intervention's effectiveness and its broader impact, including feedback from the family (mentors) and generalization of Buddy's behavior to other contexts:

Effectiveness in Reducing Anxiety: The objective metrics and subjective observations concurred that Buddy's distress during separations decreased dramatically. Initially, his anxiety index was moderate to high (whining, pacing, unable to settle for many minutes); after intervention, it was low (perhaps a brief whine, then calm). He demonstrated the ability to stay relaxed and even engage in normal behaviors (chewing toys, napping) when left alone for reasonable durations. Importantly, we did not see the emergence of any new problem behaviors – for example, some dogs in separation distress resort to destructive escape attempts or inappropriate elimination akcchf.org, but Buddy never did, and the prevention-focused plan likely helped ensure those never developed. The absence of those severe symptoms made it easier to rebuild positive routines without needing medical intervention. In terms of meeting stated goals: Buddy can now tolerate at least 30 minutes alone quietly, which was the target for this age (with the understanding that longer separations will be introduced gradually as he matures).

Family/Mentor Reflections: The family reported a significant improvement in their quality of life as well. Initially, Buddy's issues had caused them stress – they felt “tied to the house” or guilty about leaving, which is a common struggle for owners of dogs with separation anxiety. With Buddy's new learned independence, the owners are more comfortable running short errands or focusing on tasks in another room, knowing Buddy

isn't in distress. One parent noted, *"It's such a relief to check the camera and see him sleeping or playing instead of howling. We're no longer dreading what we'll find when we come home."* The process also improved the humans' understanding of dog behavior: they became more adept at reading Buddy's body language and more consistent in their own behavior. They expressed that the *mentorship approach* felt more natural and humane than they initially expected – instead of issuing commands or corrections all the time, they learned to guide Buddy through calm presence and setting boundaries. This not only solved the separation problem but also built a stronger bond of trust. They described feeling more "in tune" with Buddy, crediting the emphasis on emotional state and prevention.

The mentor (behavior resident) was satisfied that the case outcome aligns with best practices in behavioral medicine. By intervening early in life, they likely spared Buddy (and the family) from a protracted or more severe anxiety disorder. In classical separation anxiety cases that present later or more severely, it's not uncommon to require medication (such as SSRIs or anxiolytics) alongside training, and success is variable. In Buddy's case, simple behavior modification was sufficient, demonstrating the potential of early, structured interventions. The mentor reflected that *"Buddy's case shows what a difference early mentorship and structure can make. Instead of trying to 'undo' a deeply ingrained problem in adulthood, we guided him through it while he was still forming his habits."* This outcome will be added to the mentor's case logs as a successful example of a non-pharmacological early intervention for separation anxiety.

Generalization of Calm Behavior: An important aspect of the outcome is that Buddy's improved calmness and confidence generalized beyond just the specific training scenario. The family noticed that Buddy is generally more calm in various situations: for instance, he can settle in his crate at the veterinary clinic without whining, and he adapts better to changes like a different person walking him. This likely stems from the comprehensive nature of the mentorship approach – it did not only teach Buddy "not to cry when alone" in a narrow sense, but fostered overall emotional stability and resilience. Buddy learned how to relax on his own, an invaluable skill that applies whether the owners are simply in another room or truly gone out. They also observed that his improved independence made him *less* prone to demanding attention when people are home; he's content to chew a bone by himself, whereas before he might constantly seek engagement. Essentially, the training instilled an "off-switch", a capacity for Buddy to turn down his own excitement or anxiety levels and just *be*, which is a core goal of the calmness pillar.

Additionally, Buddy's behavior remained good even when the context changed (e.g., staying with a familiar sitter). He did not relapse into extreme anxiety in the sitter's care – a sign that his coping mechanism is not solely tied to one environment or person. This generalization is crucial for real-world robustness of the training: dogs don't always stay

in one context, so a solution must hold up across contexts. Buddy's owners feel confident that as he grows, they can leave him for gradually longer periods and even consider doggy daycare or boarding in the future without fear that he will be traumatized. They have essentially "vaccinated" him against severe separation anxiety through this process.

In summary, the outcome assessment indicates that the intervention met and exceeded expectations. Buddy's case can be deemed a successful resolution of early separation anxiety signs. The family's diligent implementation of the plan and the puppy's own adaptability were key factors. There were no negative side effects observed – Buddy's personality (friendly, affectionate nature) remained intact; in fact, with reduced anxiety, his true affectionate but relaxed personality shines even more. The case illustrates how focusing on *prevention, guidance, and emotional support* (rather than punishment or only symptomatic treatment) leads to a well-rounded, confident young dog.

(Outcome assessment: Buddy's separation-related behaviors greatly improved, achieving the set goals. The family's feedback underscores the benefits to both dog and owners. Buddy's newfound calmness generalized to other contexts, suggesting a lasting positive change. The mentor concludes the intervention was effective, aligning with humane best practices and preventing a potential chronic issue.)

Analysis and Discussion

This case provides a detailed look at an early intervention for separation anxiety in a puppy, using a mentorship-based, prevention-focused approach. In this section, we analyze how the outcomes compare to conventional training expectations and discuss the roles of the five pillars in mitigating Buddy's anxiety. We also consider the implications for further research and the replicability of this approach in future cases.

Comparison to Conventional Training Outcomes: Traditional training approaches to separation anxiety often emphasize behavioral conditioning techniques such as desensitization to departures, counter-conditioning with treats, or in more severe cases, the use of medication. Many conventional protocols yield only gradual progress and can be fraught with setbacks, especially if underlying anxiety isn't holistically addressed. For instance, a common recommendation is to *very slowly* increase alone time starting from mere seconds – which can take months for a dog to comfortably reach even 30 minutes alone. In contrast, Buddy's case achieved this in a matter of weeks. Several factors likely contributed to this relatively rapid success:

- (1) Buddy's young age meant his behaviors were not deeply ingrained, and his brain was developmentally pliable
- (2) The comprehensive nature of the intervention addressed not only the act of being alone, but Buddy's overall emotional state and the family's interactions with him (something standard "protocols" may not always do to the same extent)

(3) The family's high compliance and consistency, which unfortunately is not always matched in every case.

One noteworthy comparison is with cases where owners inadvertently use punishment or too much reassurance. Studies have shown that puppies whose owners use aversive techniques or even excessive coddling can have worse separation outcomes [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov) [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov). In conventional scenarios, owners might yell at a dog for chewing or soiling (aversive), which can increase fear, or on the flip side, constantly pet and comfort a dog showing anxiety (reinforcing the dog's belief that there is something to fear). In Buddy's mentorship-based plan, we avoided both extremes – there were *no harsh punishments* (aligned with literature that punishment exacerbates anxiety [petmd.com](https://www.petmd.com)), and while Buddy was set up for success with comfort objects and a safe space, the humans did not *fuss or hover* over him at signs of discomfort. Instead, they responded with calm, confident leadership.

Mentorship vs. Training: This distinction is key – rather than viewing the problem as one of *obedience* (where one might train the dog not to bark using commands or devices), the mentorship philosophy treats it as an *emotional learning* issue. The mentor (owner) provides safety, routines, and models of behavior for the puppy to emulate, much like a stable adult dog would in a natural setting. This approach likely creates a deeper, more intrinsic learning (Buddy isn't just *restraining* himself out of fear or for reward – he's truly *calm* because he feels secure).

Role of the Five Pillars in Mitigating Anxiety: Throughout the case, we saw each of *Just Behaving's* five pillars at work:

- **Mentorship:** The owners assumed the role of mentors rather than just trainers. This meant they were mindful of their own behavior and emotions, knowing Buddy would mirror them. By staying calm and confident, they signaled to Buddy that being alone is not a big deal. The brief introduction of a mentor dog also leveraged social mentorship – Buddy copied the calm demeanor of a balanced adult. Mentorship ties the whole program together, reinforcing every other pillar. Instead of a dog being conditioned through trial and error alone, he's *shown* the desired way of coping. This likely accelerated Buddy's learning and reduced confusion.
- **Calmness:** A baseline of calmness was established as a priority. This aligns with evidence that calm emotional states facilitate better learning and coping. Many training programs inadvertently keep a dog in a high-arousal state (with continuous treats, cues, excitement), but here calmness was both a tool and a goal. By ensuring Buddy was relaxed before departures and by integrating calm periods into daily life, his nervous system got regular practice being in a

parasympathetic (rest-and-digest) mode, which is incompatible with panic. Over weeks, he built a habit of calm that became his default, even when alone.

- **Indirect Correction:** Instead of direct punishment or reprimands for anxious behaviors (which could create fear or associate negativity with being alone), indirect methods were used. For example, ignoring whining (negative punishment of attention) or gently redirecting Buddy when he tried to bolt out the door (as opposed to scolding or physically forcing) provided clear feedback without intimidation. Research in canine behavior suggests that gentle, consistent corrections can effectively teach boundaries while preserving the dog's emotional security. In Buddy's case, indirect correction meant he was never traumatized during training – no event occurred that would heighten his anxiety (like a scary punishment). This likely kept his trust intact and anxiety low. The data from Generation Pup study also hinted that puppies experiencing a lot of punishment at six months had *higher* odds of SRB [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov), so our avoidance of those techniques is backed by that evidence.
- **Structured Leadership:** The family implemented a structured daily routine and consistent rules. Dogs thrive on predictability – as seen in Buddy's quick regression when the routine was suddenly broken one day. The structure (e.g., same departure cue, same procedure each time) gave Buddy a framework to understand what was expected and what will happen. According to the Just Behaving framework, clear structure provides dogs with a sense of security and control over their environment, thereby reducing anxiety. Buddy's case exemplified this: once the leaving/return pattern became familiar and uneventful, his nervous anticipation dropped. Structured leadership also involved the owners setting boundaries (like making Buddy sit and wait rather than cling at the door) – these consistent expectations made Buddy more predictable to himself, if that makes sense, and he internalized a routine of good behavior. Over time, we see he would go to his mat on his own or not react to every cue – signs that he understood the pattern.
- **Prevention:** A cornerstone of the plan was preventing serious episodes of panic and preventing reinforcement of bad habits. We didn't, for example, attempt a two-hour absence right away (which could have overwhelmed Buddy and made him truly panic, potentially causing a big setback). By preventing high-stress events, we never let Buddy "practice" intense anxiety – each absence was just mild enough that he could handle it with a bit of stress but then succeed. This is crucial because every time a dog has a full-blown panic attack when alone, it can sensitize them further (in neurological terms, those fear pathways get strengthened). Instead, we aimed to *desensitize without sensitization*, a preventive approach. We also used environmental prevention: crate training,

removing potential hazards or triggers (e.g., closing curtains so he wouldn't see something outside that could freak him out), and giving him appropriate chew items so he wouldn't turn to destructive coping mechanisms. The Generation Pup findings support such prevention – puppies who had structured, secure sleeping arrangements and sufficient sleep early on had lower odds of separation problems [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov) [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov). Buddy's early crate comfort likely helped him here. Prevention also extended to instructing the family on what *not* to do (no inadvertent reward for whining, no inconsistent messages). In essence, we tried to make it easy for Buddy to do the right thing and hard to have a bad experience.

Opportunities for Further Research: Buddy's case is a single example with specific circumstances (a dedicated family, a young puppy, professional guidance available). To solidify this approach's credibility, further research could be pursued:

- A prospective study following a cohort of puppies predisposed to separation issues (e.g., “pandemic puppies” or pups from shelters vs. those from mentorship-focused breeders) could compare outcomes between a mentorship-based intervention and standard training or no intervention. Such a study could measure not just behavioral outcomes but physiological indicators of stress (like cortisol levels, heart rate variability during alone time) to quantitatively assess emotional well-being.
- Another interesting area is social learning in alleviating anxiety – Buddy clearly benefited from a calm role model dog for that one session. Research could explore whether having a well-adjusted older dog in a household (or “buddy system” pairing anxious puppies with stable adult dogs in training classes) significantly reduces separation anxiety incidence. This aligns with our use of mentorship across species (human modeling calmness and canine role models).
- The role of owner behavior and attitudes is also ripe for study. In Buddy's case, coaching the owners in calm leadership was crucial. Surveys or trials could evaluate how owner stress or consistency correlates with dog improvement. Perhaps interventions that include owner-focused training (teaching mindfulness or stress management to the owner) could enhance results – anecdotally we see it helped here.
- Importantly, documenting cases like Buddy's in a systematic way contributes to the evidence base for *early intervention*. Often, separation anxiety is only studied in adult dogs referred for severe issues. By studying puppies, veterinary behaviorists could develop preventive guidelines that might be disseminated as standard advice to all new puppy owners (e.g., encouraging alone-time training from week 9 onward in a puppy's life to immunize against later problems).

Replicability as a Model: The structured packet we created for Buddy now serves as a template for similar cases. It demonstrates that a mentorship-based approach can be articulated formally and yields measurable success. Future real-world case studies can follow this model by including:

- A thorough initial history and baseline assessment (as we did),
- Clear definition of metrics to track,
- Use of a daily journal to capture nuances,
- A week-by-week plan aligning with the five pillars,
- Outcome evaluation and reflection.

Given that many aspects of Buddy's plan are general good practice (gradual desensitization, consistent routine, avoidance of punishment), this model is highly replicable. The unique emphasis on the five pillars may require some education for those not familiar with Just Behaving's philosophy, but this case study packet itself helps illustrate those concepts in action. For instance, trainers or behaviorists reading this can tangibly see what *indirect correction* looked like for Buddy (not rushing back when he whined, but also not letting him learn that whining brings mom back). They can also see how *prevention-first* thinking guided every step (never jumping ahead too quickly, controlling the environment, etc.). The hope is that by sharing case studies like this in academic and professional circles (such as at veterinary behavior conferences or in resident rounds), more practitioners will be encouraged to integrate these pillars into their behavior modification plans.

One could argue that a limitation of this case is the high level of owner commitment and the relatively controlled environment (e.g., one family member had flexibility to practice frequent short departures). In more chaotic or busy households, replicating this might be harder. However, the principles remain the same and can be adapted – even busy owners can be taught to make every interaction count (quality over quantity). Future cases could test the approach in different breeds or older dogs to see how it holds up.

Conclusion: Buddy's case bridges the gap between a traditional clinical case report and a practical training narrative. It showcases that prevention and mentorship can yield faster, sustainable results compared to reactionary or purely symptom-focused training. By treating the root causes – insecurity, lack of experience being alone, and unclear communication – we effectively “inoculated” Buddy against a serious behavior disorder. This case reinforces the idea that dogs are not just subjects to be trained, but mentees to be guided. When given clarity, consistency, and compassion, even a sensitive puppy like Buddy can learn to navigate challenges like solitude with confidence.

Going forward, integrating the five-pillar philosophy into early puppy education (for breeders, shelters, veterinarians, and new owners) could drastically reduce the incidence of separation anxiety and other behavior problems. This aligns with a preventive medicine mindset: it is better to build a dog's resilience from the start than to fix problems later. Buddy's story can serve as an encouraging example and a blueprint for such efforts. Continued documentation of similar cases will further validate this approach and hopefully influence the standard of care in canine behavioral health.

(In discussion, we compared Buddy's outcome to typical cases: early, holistic intervention seemed to expedite success. The five pillars – mentorship, calmness, indirect correction, structured leadership, prevention – each played a critical role and proved synergistic in reducing anxiety. The case underscores the value of addressing the emotional and relationship aspects of the problem, not just the symptoms. It invites further research into early-life interventions and highlights that this case study can be used as a model template for future implementations. The consistent positive results suggest that the mentorship-based approach is both effective and replicable with committed caregivers.