

Trust, Structure, and Solitude: How *Just Behaving* Addresses Separation Anxiety in Dogs

Introduction

Family dogs thrive on social connection, so it is perhaps no surprise that being left alone can trigger profound distress in some dogs. “Separation-related distress” is an umbrella term for the spectrum of behaviors and anxiety signs a dog may exhibit when separated from their family. These can range from mild whining or pacing to full-blown panic attacks with destructive behavior, house soiling, or self-injury pursuit.unimelb.edu.au. Far from a rare quirk, separation distress is one of the most common behavioral challenges reported by pet owners. Estimates vary, but large-scale studies typically find on the order of 14–20% of pet dogs show signs of separation anxiety severe enough to be considered a disorder preventivevet.com pursuit.unimelb.edu.au. By some accounts, the incidence may be even higher in certain populations – for example, surveys during the COVID-19 pandemic suggested a dramatic rise in dogs experiencing separation issues as owners returned to work nihrecord.nih.gov nihrecord.nih.gov.

Separation-related problems are more than just an inconvenience; they are a welfare concern for the dog and a source of stress for owners. Dogs suffering from true separation anxiety experience real, ongoing distress – not mere misbehavior out of spite pursuit.unimelb.edu.au. Physiologically, an anxious dog left alone may undergo a stress response marked by elevated cortisol, rapid heart rate, and frantic efforts to cope with the panic of isolation. Over time, chronic stress of this sort can even undermine a dog’s immune system and health en.wikipedia.org. Behaviorally, the fallout can be dramatic: distressed dogs commonly bark or howl for hours, scratch or chew at doors in an attempt to reunite with their person, have accidents indoors due to loss of bowel/bladder control, or even jump through windows and escape pursuit.unimelb.edu.au en.wikipedia.org. These behaviors often result in damage to the home (chewed furniture, scratched door frames) and can cause injury to the dog (broken teeth or nails, lacerations, etc.). The strain on the human-animal bond can be severe – owners may feel overwhelmed, trapped in their home, or resentful, and neighbors may complain about the noise. Indeed, undesirable behaviors like those seen in separation distress are a leading cause of pet dogs being relinquished to shelters or even euthanized for behavioral reasons frontiersin.org frontiersin.org. Separation-related distress sits at the nexus of canine welfare and owner wellbeing, making it a critical issue to understand and address in modern pet dog ownership.

In this paper, we explore separation-related distress in family dogs through the unique lens of *Just Behaving* – a philosophy of canine companionship that blends practical guidance with emotional, developmental, and philosophical insights. The discussion will examine how prevalent these issues are and consider larger systemic and cultural

factors that set the stage for an “epidemic” of anxious home-alone dogs. We will delve into the root causes: from early puppyhood experiences and raising practices, to the influence of human attachment styles, to events like rehoming or household routine changes (such as the recent shift to work-from-home and back to office). Throughout, scientific research findings will be integrated to ground each point in evidence. We then critique how traditional dog training approaches, conventional views on exercise and play, and emotionally-driven human–dog relationships may be falling short in addressing the problem – and in some cases, inadvertently exacerbating it. To illustrate these patterns in a real-world context, we will consider examples such as the case of “Ricky,” a family dog whose history embodies many common themes of separation distress. Finally, we offer an alternative perspective: how prevention and guidance rooted in *Just Behaving*’s emphasis on mentorship, structure, and calmness can provide a more holistic path forward. Rather than prescribing a one-size-fits-all solution, the goal is to encourage reflection and discussion, inviting veterinarians, behaviorists, trainers, and thoughtful pet owners to re-examine how we raise and relate to our dogs in order to foster resilience and security against separation-related problems.

By blending research with practical philosophy, this paper stands as a comprehensive resource on separation-related distress in pet dogs. It aims to deepen our understanding of why so many family dogs struggle to be alone, and how a shift in our approach – one that balances academic insight with empathy and realism – can better support both dogs and owners in overcoming this challenge.

Prevalence and the Modern Context of Separation Distress

Separation anxiety is often described as a “modern problem” for the modern dog. While dogs have lived alongside humans for millennia, the lifestyles of pet dogs today differ markedly from those of their working ancestors. Statistics on prevalence suggest that separation-related behavior issues are extremely widespread among pet dogs. Depending on the survey and criteria used, anywhere from about one in every 5 dogs to almost one in 4–6 dogs may be affected preventivevet.com pursuit.unimelb.edu.au. One analysis noted that 72–85% of pet dogs exhibit at least one type of problematic behavior, and separation-related problems rank high among those concerns frontiersin.org. In a pre-pandemic estimate, roughly 20% of pet dogs had clinical-level separation anxiety nihrecord.nih.gov. Veterinary behaviorists now suspect that number has climbed even higher post-pandemic, with the surge of “pandemic puppies” who grew accustomed to constant human company nihrecord.nih.gov nihrecord.nih.gov. In one 2021 survey of pet owners, a startling 76% reported their dog experiences some degree of separation anxiety – a figure much higher than traditional estimates (~14%) and likely reflective of the unique circumstances of 2020–2021 kinship.com. While that 76% may not represent clinical diagnoses, it underscores that *many* owners perceive separation distress in their dogs as a real issue.

Why might separation issues be so common, even expected, in today's pet dogs? A big-picture look at the cultural and systemic context offers some answers. In decades past, and still in many parts of the world, dogs had "jobs" or freer lifestyles – they might accompany us outdoors all day, herd livestock, roam the neighborhood, or at least spend much of their time in the company of other dogs or people. In contrast, the vast majority of dogs today are kept primarily as companions or family members rather than as working partners pursuit.unimelb.edu.au. We selectively breed and raise them to be emotionally attuned to us and integrated into our homes. Paradoxically, however, modern family life often means that all human family members are out of the house for work or school for long hours, leaving the dog alone in an empty, silent home pursuit.unimelb.edu.au pursuit.unimelb.edu.au. Contemporary society has thus created a situation where we expect dogs to be constant loving companions *when we are home*, but also expect them to tolerate being completely alone for large portions of the day while we fulfill our obligations. This is a stark departure from the canine evolutionary norm of near-constant social contact (with either humans or other dogs). As Dr. Diane van Rooy of University of Melbourne notes, the changing role of dogs – from outdoor working partners to indoor family pets – coupled with our own busy schedules has set the stage for a rise in separation anxiety cases pursuit.unimelb.edu.au pursuit.unimelb.edu.au. We *want* dogs to be like family members, but unlike human family who understand our comings and goings, dogs are often left confused and distressed by daily long absences.

Another systemic factor is the manner in which dogs join our families. Adoption and rehoming practices have shifted over time. Today, many people acquire dogs through shelters/rescues or as rehomed adults, meaning a significant number of dogs have experienced the trauma of abandonment or multiple homes. Research indicates dogs with such unstable early lives are at higher risk: one report found that stray dogs had a 56% higher incidence of separation anxiety diagnoses, and mixed-breed dogs (often from shelters) had 67% higher incidence, compared to the general dog population en.wikipedia.org. It appears past experiences and living conditions leave an imprint – dogs who have been uprooted or lost their primary attachment figure once may be more likely to exhibit anxiety about being left again. The rise in rescue adoptions (which is positive in many ways) does mean that many pet dogs come with unknown histories or possible trauma that could predispose them to separation distress.

The COVID-19 pandemic amplified these issues. An unprecedented number of people transitioned to working from home, and many decided it was the perfect time to get a puppy or adopt a dog (leading to the so-called "pandemic puppy boom"). These dogs spent their formative months with human companions around nearly 24/7. As life normalized, owners returning to in-person work found their pandemic pets utterly unprepared to be left alone. Veterinary behaviorists report surges in separation anxiety

cases in the past two years as these dogs struggle to adapt nihrecord.nih.gov. In essence, the pandemic created a large cohort of dogs who never had to learn independence during early development, and the abrupt change in routine triggered distress. One survey by a pet insurance provider found over half of pet owners believed their dog had separation anxiety as they returned to office work nihrecord.nih.gov. Although this is self-reported, it aligns with the anecdotal consensus among professionals: separation distress cases have spiked in the wake of pandemic lifestyle shifts.

It is worth noting that the definition of separation-related problems can range from mild to severe, which affects prevalence numbers. Not every dog who howls when the owner leaves for a few minutes has a clinical disorder. Some dogs vocalize or chew due to boredom, or were never taught house manners, rather than true anxiety. True separation anxiety typically implies a *panic-like state* in the absence of attachment figures, and the behaviors are driven by distress (not mischief or lack of training). For the purpose of this paper, we include the broader spectrum of “separation-related distress behaviors,” recognizing that even subclinical issues can impact welfare. Whether a dog is experiencing full-blown terror or just mild frustration when alone, the fact remains that the dog is not at ease with solitude – and in a pet dog expected to spend hours alone routinely, that is a problem.

In summary, separation-related distress is common and increasing among family dogs, fueled by modern lifestyles that often conflict with dogs’ social needs. We have essentially engineered a perfect storm: dogs more socially and emotionally bonded to humans than ever before, yet placed in environments where they are routinely isolated. The next sections will explore how a variety of factors – from how a puppy is raised, to the owner’s own behaviors and attachment, to life changes and even training methods – all contribute to whether a dog adapts to being alone or develops distress. Understanding these root causes is key to formulating effective, compassionate solutions that go beyond the superficial and address the issue at its source.

Recognizing Separation-Related Distress in the Family Dog

Before diving into causes, it is helpful to clearly recognize what separation-related distress looks like in practice. As mentioned, dogs are social animals, and it’s normal for them to show some concern or protest when separated from their “pack.” The threshold between normal behavior and a problem often lies in the intensity and persistence of the dog’s reaction, and whether the dog can eventually settle down on their own. A dog who whines softly for a few minutes after you leave, then curls up for a nap, is not considered to have separation anxiety – that reaction is within the bounds of normal. In contrast, a dog who panics consistently as soon as they realize they are alone – and cannot self-soothe – likely has a separation-related disorder.

Common signs of separation distress include: vocalization (whining, barking, howling) that continues for an extended period after departure; destructive behavior (such as chewing door frames, scratching at doors or windows, tearing up furniture or blinds) focused on escape attempts or coping; household “accidents” – urinating or defecating inside even though the dog is otherwise housetrained – due to stress; excessive drooling or panting; pacing in repetitive circuits; refusing to eat or play with toys when alone (a normally food-motivated dog might ignore a stuffed Kong due to anxiety); and in extreme cases, self-injury (broken teeth or nails from trying to break out of a crate or door, or lick granulomas from anxious licking). Some dogs with separation issues also show clingy behavior even when the owner is home – following the person from room to room, becoming distressed if closed out of a room, or reacting anxiously to subtle cues of departure (like picking up keys or putting on shoes). It’s as if the dog is in a hyper-vigilant state, always shadowing the owner to ensure they don’t disappear pursuit.unimelb.edu.au en.wikipedia.org.

Importantly, not all signs are loud or overt. Some dogs suffer in silence. A dog might not destroy the house or bark, but could spend the entire absence pacing and trembling, or simply be unable to rest, which is also indicative of distress pursuit.unimelb.edu.au pursuit.unimelb.edu.au. These quieter cases can be overlooked (“Oh, he seems fine when I get home, no damage”), but a video recording can reveal a dog who never truly settles the whole time – a clear sign of anxiety. Thus, observation (or video monitoring) is key to accurate diagnosis en.wikipedia.org. Professionals often recommend setting up a camera to record the dog when alone; this can distinguish between a dog that barks for a couple minutes then rests versus one who remains anxious throughout. It also helps rule out other issues – for example, a dog urinating indoors only when left could be due to separation anxiety or could be from a medical problem or incomplete housebreaking. Seeing the context (is the dog circling anxiously and then urinating versus calmly relieving itself) helps clarify.

Behaviorists have also noted that dogs with separation anxiety often have a particular attachment profile with their owner. Interestingly, research suggests that these dogs are not simply “over-attached” in a healthy way, but rather have an *insecure attachment* characterized as ambivalent or anxious attachment mdpi.com. They may both crave the owner’s presence and lack true confidence that the owner will be available or return. For instance, one study found that dogs diagnosed with separation anxiety tended to behave in an ambivalent manner – extremely distressed by separation, yet not fully comforted by return, often remaining in a heightened state of anxiety or clinginess mdpi.com. This parallels what we see in human psychology with insecure attachments. Moreover, these dogs’ owners were found to be *less sensitive and responsive* on average (perhaps inadvertently), compared to owners of securely attached dogs mdpi.com. In practical terms, a dog with a secure attachment might trust that their

owner will come back and therefore handle short absences calmly; a dog with an insecure attachment is unsure if the owner is reliable, thus freaks out when alone and even when reunited might display conflict (exuberant greetings mixed with signs of stress).

It's critical to dispel a common myth: Dogs with separation anxiety are not "being naughty" out of boredom or spite. Punishing a dog for shredding the couch or soiling the rug in one's absence is not only futile but cruel in the context of true separation distress. The dog is not making a conscious choice to "punish" the owner for leaving; rather, the destruction or mess is a byproduct of panic. Studies have shown that punishing or scolding a dog for separation-related behaviors does nothing to solve the root anxiety and can in fact worsen the overall stress the dog experiences en.wikipedia.org. The dog may only learn that upon the owner's return, more bad stuff happens (getting yelled at), compounding their fear. Thus, recognizing these behaviors for what they are – *symptoms of anxiety* – is fundamental for any effective intervention. As the Merck Veterinary Manual notes, it's important to first rule out medical causes and then confirm separation distress by witnessing the dog's behavior in the absence; only then can an appropriate behavior modification plan be devised en.wikipedia.org en.wikipedia.org.

In summary, a family dog with separation-related distress is one who cannot find calm when left alone. The severity can range widely, but even moderate cases deserve attention given the suffering involved. Recognizing the signs (overt and subtle) and understanding that this is an emotional disorder – not a willful misconduct – sets the stage for a compassionate approach. With this understanding, we can now explore *why* so many dogs end up in this state. The causes are multifactorial, rooted in both nature and nurture: how the dog was raised, how we as humans interact with our dogs, and the life events that shape their world. In the next section, we identify key factors contributing to separation-related distress in family dogs, grounding each in research where possible.

Roots of the Problem: Why Do Family Dogs Develop Separation Distress?

Separation anxiety does not arise in a vacuum. It is the end result of various influences in a dog's life history and environment. Some dogs weather life's absences just fine, whereas others fall apart – the difference often lies in early experiences, training (or lack thereof), the owner's behavior, and sometimes sheer temperament. Here we examine several major factors that research and practical experience have linked to the development of separation-related distress. Keep in mind that these factors often interact. It's rarely just one cause; rather, a combination of stressors and deficiencies in the dog's upbringing set the stage for the problem. Understanding these can help us prevent issues in the first place and also inform more effective treatment plans for dogs already suffering.

Early Puppyhood and Rearing Practices

Early life experiences have a profound impact on a dog's emotional development. Two aspects in particular stand out: the age at which a puppy is separated from its mother and littermates, and whether the puppy is gently taught to handle short periods of solitude during the formative weeks.

Age of separation from the litter: Studies consistently show that puppies taken from their litter too early (significantly before the typical 8-week mark) are at higher risk for a host of behavioral problems, including separation-related issues. During weeks 3–12 of age, puppies go through a critical socialization period where they learn important skills from their mother and littermates – how to communicate, how to tolerate frustration, and basic emotional regulation [mdpi.com](https://www.mdpi.com) [mdpi.com](https://www.mdpi.com). If removed during this sensitive phase, the puppy misses out on those lessons. Research out of Italy compared dogs that had been separated from the litter at 30–40 days old (roughly 4–5 weeks) versus those separated at 60 days (8+ weeks). The differences were striking. Dogs separated at just 4–5 weeks (many of which came from pet stores or less responsible sources) were significantly more likely to develop problem behaviors in adulthood – including destructive behaviors, excessive vocalization, attention-seeking, and fearfulness – compared to those that stayed with the litter until at least 8 weeks

[veterinarypracticenews.com](https://www.veterinarypracticenews.com) [veterinarypracticenews.com](https://www.veterinarypracticenews.com). In fact, aside from a few specific behaviors, *almost all* problem behaviors were more prevalent in the early-separated group regardless of breed or other factors [veterinarypracticenews.com](https://www.veterinarypracticenews.com). In effect, early separation set the stage for a more anxious, less well-adjusted dog. Other studies have echoed these findings, linking “puppy mill” or pet store origins (which often involve very early weaning and isolation in crates) to higher rates of separation anxiety and other anxieties later on mydogtrainerlisa.com [mdpi.com](https://www.mdpi.com). The takeaway is clear: allowing a puppy to fully benefit from its mother and littermates until at least 8 weeks (many breeders now prefer 10–12 weeks for small breeds) can reduce the likelihood of later separation distress. The mother dog, in particular, provides a natural “secure base” in early weeks – a pup learns confidence from knowing mom is around. Snatching that away too soon can create a lasting void in the pup's sense of security.

Lack of early independence training: On the flip side of the coin, consider a puppy that *is* kept until 8 weeks or beyond, but then goes to a new home where the well-meaning owners never leave its side for weeks on end. Perhaps someone is always home, or the puppy is constantly cuddled and doted on 24/7 because it's so cute and the family is excited. While abundant love is wonderful, it's crucial to also teach a puppy that being alone is a normal part of life. If a puppy never experiences a gentle, gradual introduction to short periods of isolation, the first time they are truly left alone (say at 5 months old when the family finally goes out for dinner) can be utterly terrifying. Good breeders and trainers recommend habituating puppies to solitude in small doses: for

example, having the puppy nap in a crate in a quiet room for an hour a day, or using baby gates to prevent the pup from following humans everywhere all the time. This isn't to be cruel; it's to ensure the puppy's neural circuits learn early on that *separation is temporary and safe*. A supervised puppy can be given a stuffed Kong in their crate while the owner steps out to the mailbox – a tiny separation with a positive outcome (owner returns, nothing bad happened). Without these baby steps, the puppy may perceive sudden future separations as abandonment.

Unfortunately, many new puppy owners either coddle the pup constantly out of love, **or** swing to the other extreme and leave the puppy alone too long, too soon (thinking they need to “cry it out” – a misguided carryover from outdated beliefs). The *Just Behaving* philosophy strongly emphasizes a balanced approach: plenty of warmth and inclusion, but also structure and planned independence even in puppyhood. For instance, ensuring the pup has a safe confinement area (like a pen or crate) and is comfortable spending time there *daily* can prevent the pup from becoming hyper-attached. When done properly, a crate becomes a puppy's cozy den – a place associated with relaxation and good things, not a prison. Many dogs raised in this manner will voluntarily nap in their crate or “place” even with the door open, because it's always been a secure spot. By contrast, if a puppy is never crated or left alone until adolescence, trying to crate them during an anxious episode later is much harder (they may fight the confinement because they were never acclimated). As one author put it, dogs that know “my owner always comes back, and in the meantime I can relax” are far less likely to develop separation anxiety.

Early experiences can thus be a double-edged sword: separate a pup too abruptly or raise them in a void of social comfort, and you get anxiety; but also smother a pup with constant companionship and zero boundaries, and you risk a dog who has zero coping skills when solitude inevitably occurs. The ideal is a middle ground of secure attachment plus gentle independence training. This balance – essentially what a stable mother dog does for her pups (warmth and structure) – is at the heart of prevention.

Human Attachment Styles and Owner Interactions

Dogs are astonishingly perceptive of human emotions and routines. The way an owner behaves and the relational “style” they cultivate with their dog can greatly influence the dog's attachment security. In essence, owners function as parental figures for their dogs, and just as different parenting styles affect a child's confidence or anxiety, different owner behaviors can affect a dog's ability to be alone.

One area of scientific inquiry has been the attachment style of the owner themselves. Are owners who are anxious or overly attached more likely to have dogs with separation issues? Conversely, do very avoidant (aloof) owners lead to insecure dogs? Some studies have found intriguing correlations. For example, a 2019 study found that owners

high in neuroticism (anxiety) and those with poorer mental well-being tended to have dogs who displayed more “anxious attachment” behaviors [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov) [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov). Another study suggested that owners with an avoidant attachment style (people who are less comfortable with closeness and may be less attentive caregivers) had dogs with a higher incidence of separation-related disorder; the authors theorized that these owners might not provide the dog with as much emotional reassurance or consistency, leading the dogs to become insecure when alone [researchgate.net](https://www.researchgate.net). In simpler terms, dogs may mirror or be shaped by the emotional availability of their humans. An owner who unconsciously sends signals of inconsistency – perhaps sometimes very loving, other times indifferent – might foster a clingy, anxious dog always seeking assurance. On the flip side, an owner who is extremely anxious about the dog (imagine a person who can hardly leave the house themselves out of worry for the dog, or who becomes very upset at the thought of the dog being stressed) might inadvertently reinforce the dog’s anxiety by feeding into it. Dogs are experts at reading our micro-signals; if every time you leave you are internally tense and guilt-ridden, your dog likely senses that and concludes that being apart *is* something to fear (after all, their trusted human seems worried too!).

It’s a delicate dance. Owners who love their dogs dearly sometimes unintentionally encourage emotional over-dependence. For instance, consider the common routine of dramatic departures and reunions: The owner, feeling guilty about leaving, gives the dog a big emotional farewell – “Mommy will be back, you be a good boy, I’ll miss you!” in a babying tone, perhaps with numerous treats and hugs as they walk out the door. The dog is amped up and fully aware something big is happening. Then while away, the owner constantly frets (maybe checking a pet cam and reacting emotionally to any whine). Upon returning, the owner bursts through the door in a flurry of high-pitched greetings: “I’m back!! Did you miss me? Oh my poor baby!” This human-centered practice of elaborate departures and greetings teaches the dog that separations are a huge deal – essentially *cause for concern*. In contrast, calm and matter-of-fact comings and goings teach the dog that departures are normal and not worth panic. Excitable owners may inadvertently reward the dog’s frantic greeting behavior as well, completing a cycle of heightened arousal. As one training guide notes, making a “big fuss” over a dog when coming or going can function as a reward for the dog’s overexcited or anxious behavior, whereas keeping interactions low-key communicates that everything is fine [nihrecord.nih.gov](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov).

Another example is owners who indulge every demand the dog makes out of love. If every whine, nudge, or bark for attention is met with petting or treats, the dog learns that constant engagement is the norm. This can create what the *Just Behaving* philosophy calls *emotional dependency*. The dog never learns to self-soothe or entertain itself; it’s effectively trained the human to provide interaction at all times. Later, when the dog is

left alone and those demands cannot be met, the dog spirals into frustration and anxiety. A section of the Just Behaving guidelines explicitly warns of this: *“Constantly engaging with the dog, providing continuous attention, or treating normal separation as cause for elaborate greetings and departures...fosters separation anxiety, demand behaviors, and an inability to self-regulate or be content without constant human interaction.”* The recommended alternative is establishing healthy patterns of engagement followed by independent time, teaching the dog early on that it’s normal to have periods of calm separation after periods of attention. For instance, after a play or training session, the owner might direct the dog to lie on a bed or in a crate with a chew toy while the owner does something else. This “together but separate” time is invaluable practice for the dog’s coping skills. Owners who never do this – either due to their own desire for doggy companionship 24/7 or fear of the dog being unhappy – may actually be setting the dog up for a harder fall when real separation eventually occurs.

It’s also worth noting that owner behavior upon return can affect the dog’s future anxiety. If an owner returns to find a mess and yells or punishes the dog, that dog is not only anxious from being alone, but now is *also* anxious about the owner’s return (associating it with punishment). This double anxiety can create a very maladaptive cycle where the dog is damned if you do, damned if you don’t – anxious alone, and anxious anticipating scolding later en.wikipedia.org. Fortunately, more owners today understand that you should never punish a dog for anxiety-driven behavior, but remnants of old-school thinking persist in some circles (“he knows he did wrong, look, he’s guilty” – in reality the dog has learned to cower because punishment is coming, not because it conceptually understands any wrongdoing).

In summary, the human’s mindset and actions are a huge piece of the separation anxiety puzzle. Dogs take cues from us. If we project calm confidence and set consistent, kind boundaries, dogs are more likely to feel secure. If we are inconsistent, overindulgent, or highly emotional in ways the dog can’t understand, we may undermine their sense of stability. The ideal is an owner who can provide *calm leadership*: affectionate but not frantic, supportive but also able to set limits. This correlates with the concept of a *secure base*. Research in attachment theory (which, though originally about human infants, has been applied to pet dogs) shows that dogs use their owners as a secure base in unfamiliar situations. A dog with a trustworthy, steady leader is more confident to explore and handle stress. Thus, owners need to examine their own attachment style and habits. Are we behaving like reliable mentors, or like unpredictable sources of extreme excitement and comfort? Later, we will discuss how the Just Behaving approach guides owners to embody a calm, mentor-like presence which in turn helps dogs form secure attachments.

Rehoming, Trauma, and Household Transitions

Life is not static, and many dogs will experience major changes in their living situation during their lifetime. These changes can be significant triggers or causes for separation distress, especially if the dog already had some predisposition.

Rehoming and shelter history: As touched on earlier, dogs adopted from shelters or rescues (or those given up and rehomed privately) often have a higher incidence of separation anxiety en.wikipedia.org. To the dog, being abandoned by one family and suddenly thrust into a new environment is a massive attachment rupture. It's not hard to imagine why a dog who has *lost* their first home might cling desperately to the next person who shows them love – and then panic at any hint of being left again. Many rescue dogs bond very quickly with their adopters (perhaps after a lonely shelter stay), and that strong bond is wonderful, but it can come with a side of insecurity: the dog may follow the new owner everywhere, fearing being left. If the new adopter is not aware and doesn't take steps to gently teach the dog that departures are temporary, the dog's fear of abandonment can snowball. Even dogs that never had separation issues in their original home might develop it after being surrendered, because the trauma of that event creates a lingering fear. Anecdotally, shelter workers report that some owner-surrendered dogs exhibit severe stress in kennels and later separation anxiety in adoptive homes, likely mourning the loss of their previous attachment figure. Patience and consistency in the new home can help, but it requires time for the dog to truly trust that "this is my permanent family."

Major routine changes: Dogs are creatures of habit, and a sudden change in the household schedule or composition can trigger separation problems even in an adult dog that was previously fine. The classic example is the post-pandemic return to work scenario discussed earlier. A dog who spent a year never alone suddenly faces 8-hour stretches of solitude – a drastic change that can induce anxiety even in a typically well-adjusted dog nihrecord.nih.gov nihrecord.nih.gov. Another example is a family move or relocating to a new house. The unfamiliar environment can unsettle a dog's sense of territory and security. If in the new home the owners' schedule or behavior also changes (maybe a bigger house where the dog is left in the yard more, or owners now commute further), the dog may respond with distress. Changes in the family itself are also significant: the birth of a baby (the dog suddenly receives less attention and may be sequestered away at times), kids leaving for college (a person the dog was attached to is now gone, and perhaps the dog is left alone more often), a divorce or death in the family (the household member the dog always stayed with during the day is no longer there), etc. All of these events can destabilize a dog's routine and attachments, sometimes manifesting as new separation anxiety. In fact, "a major life change" such as a new home, new household member, or loss of a family member is frequently listed as a trigger in separation anxiety cases en.wikipedia.org. The dog's world as they knew it has changed; some dogs become generally more anxious or clingy as a result.

It's notable that many dogs develop separation issues later in life rather than in puppyhood. One study noted it's even more common in older dogs pursuit.unimelb.edu.au. Why might an older dog suddenly struggle? Besides the changes mentioned (retirement of owner so dog was never alone, then owner's schedule changes again, etc.), older dogs can have declining cognition or confidence, making them less resilient. For instance, a senior dog with some vision/hearing loss might become more anxious when alone because they can't perceive their environment as well and feel vulnerable. Also, if an older dog has had a recent health scare or painful condition, they might become extra dependent on the owner's presence for a sense of safety.

Crate experiences and confinement trauma: A specific aspect of environment change worth singling out is how a dog is confined when left. If a dog has had a particularly traumatic experience related to being confined alone – say, locked in a crate for many hours with soiling, or even just never properly crate-trained but then suddenly crated during an absence – it can create a phobic response to confinement that intertwines with separation anxiety. Some dogs do better if left loose in the house rather than crated, and others vice versa, depending on their associations. Sadly, dogs with severe anxiety have been known to injure themselves badly trying to escape a crate or room. A dog that bent the bars of a crate and broke teeth in the process, for example, may thereafter have an even stronger panic response to being crated (now the crate itself is viewed as dangerous). Thus, the history of how absences were managed matters. A dog that was consistently left in a pleasant, safe area with incremental duration likely fares better than one that was isolated in a garage or small kennel with little preparation.

Overstimulation and Lack of Calm Behavior Habits

One less obvious factor in separation distress is the general arousal level and lifestyle the dog experiences with their owners. Dogs that live in a constant state of excitement or hyper-arousal may have a harder time switching gears into a relaxed, “alone time” mode. There is a growing recognition among behavior experts that a dog's inability to be calm when alone is often tied to an inability to be calm, period.

Think of a dog who is constantly entertained: the owners play high-energy fetch or tug for an hour in the morning, then someone is always chatting to or petting the dog whenever it's around, and in the evening the dog gets riled up with rowdy play with the kids. The dog's day is a rollercoaster of excitement and interaction. While exercise and play are good in moderation, an overstimulated dog may never learn how to settle on its own. It's analogous to a child who is given an iPad and attention every moment – they might struggle to develop imagination or self-soothing because they've never had to handle “downtime.” If such a dog suddenly finds itself alone with nothing to do, the contrast is immense: from full blast stimulation to zero. This can lead to boredom at

best, or panic at worst, as the dog has no idea how to cope with inactivity or silence. In some cases, dogs effectively become *adrenaline junkies* – their bodies almost addicted to the constant adrenaline of play and attention. When alone, not only do they miss their person emotionally, but physiologically they crash and feel uneasy without the buzz of activity.

Traditional advice to owners with an anxious dog often includes “exercise the dog more” or “give him lots of play before you leave so he’s tired.” Exercise is indeed helpful to release pent-up energy, but exercise alone is not a cure for separation anxiety and can be a double-edged sword if done in a frantic way. A dog that is thoroughly physically tired may rest for a while, but if the core issue is panic without the owner, exhaustion won’t fully prevent the anxiety (some extremely anxious dogs will override their fatigue and still panic). Moreover, if the exercise itself was very high-adrenaline (like intense fetch or vigorous roughhousing right before the owner leaves), the dog’s arousal level might actually be heightened as the owner walks out the door. In contrast, calming activities that engage the mind (like a scent work game or a food puzzle) might be more effective pre-departure routines. The *Just Behaving* approach emphasizes calmness as the default state, not just as a response to separation but as a way of life. Dogs raised with a lot of structured quiet time and “settle” training are essentially taught how to turn off their engines and be okay with it. This pays dividends when they are left alone – such dogs are more likely to just go lie down and sleep.

Another area of overstimulation is how we play and interact with dogs generally. Conventional wisdom often equates a wagging, wiggling, jumping dog with a “happy dog.” Many families instinctively ramp a dog up with excited baby talk, rough-and-tumble play, and constant excitement because they interpret that as the dog having fun. While of course play is natural and enjoyable for dogs, if every interaction is high-octane, the dog can develop a baseline of excitability that makes calm behavior (especially in solitude) very difficult. The dog essentially never practices being calm. Some evidence of this comes from surveys on canine behavior comorbidities: one large Finnish study found that hyperactivity/inattention in dogs was positively correlated with separation-related behaviors – in other words, dogs who were rated as very hyper or impulsive also tended to have more separation problems [mdpi.com](https://www.mdpi.com). This suggests an underlying trait or lifestyle link: perhaps highly stimulated, unfocused dogs (think of a “canine ADHD” analogy) cannot cope with confinement or lack of stimulation when alone, leading to distress. It’s also possible that separation distress and hyperactivity are both manifestations of underlying anxiety. Regardless, it hints that helping a dog learn to relax could ameliorate both issues.

Finally, overstimulation isn’t just about physical activity – it can also be constant emotional stimulation. Some owners inadvertently keep their dog in a state of emotional arousal by over-reacting to everything the dog does (laughing when the dog zooms

around, immediately consoling at every whimper, etc.). The dog never experiences emotional neutrality. A classic example: an owner who immediately attends to a dog at the slightest bark or demand may reinforce that aroused state. The dog becomes less capable of *self-*soothing or self-entertaining. Then, when alone, without anyone to respond to its slightest discomfort, the dog escalates.

In short, a lifestyle lacking in structured calmness is a risk factor for separation distress. The prevention for this, which we will cover in the solutions section, is to consciously incorporate calm, low-stimulation periods into the dog's daily routine (what Just Behaving calls "structured companionship" – being together in a calm way, not always rambunctious play). Teaching a young dog to chill out on a mat while you read a book is as important as teaching "sit" or "fetch." It sets the stage for the dog to handle being alone with a chew toy later on, rather than freaking out from the sudden drop in human-led activity.

The "Perfect Storm" Case: Ricky's Story

To illustrate how these various factors can converge in a real family dog's life, let's consider a composite case study of Ricky, a two-year-old mixed-breed dog. Ricky's journey is a telling example of how separation-related distress can develop and escalate through a combination of well-intentioned missteps and life changes – a "perfect storm" that is all too common.

Early life: Ricky was adopted at 8 weeks old from a neighbor whose accidental litter needed homes. He was an adorable, fluffy puppy, and his new family fell head-over-heels for him. They took him everywhere with them whenever possible and lavished him with affection. Working from home during the pandemic, at least one family member was around almost constantly for Ricky's first year of life. He was rarely crated (he slept in the owners' bed at night and hung out with them on the couch by day) and if the family needed to run an errand, they often took Ricky along in the car. On the few occasions Ricky had to stay behind, someone would rush back within 30 minutes because they were worried about him. In essence, Ricky never learned to be alone for any substantial duration. He also became very accustomed to near-constant social interaction – if he whimpered or nudged for play, someone engaged with him. His humans doted on him like a baby.

Human interactions: Ricky's family loved him deeply, but in hindsight they realized they might have been *too* permissive and emotionally overinvested. They treated him like a little prince – he was rarely denied anything. If he barked while they were on the phone, someone gave him a treat or toy to appease him. If he jumped up excitedly, they would laugh and pet him (thinking it was cute). Departures and reunions were big emotional productions: "Don't worry, sweetheart, we'll be right back!" and enthusiastic hugging upon return. Ricky became extremely attached to every family member – a

velcro dog who followed them room to room. If a bathroom door was closed on him, he'd scratch at it and whine. The family found it endearing that he wanted to be with them 24/7. They figured it was a sign of love.

Lifestyle and stimulation: Because the family was home so much, they played with Ricky often. He got multiple walks a day and plenty of playtime in the yard. However, most of the play was high-energy – games of chase, rambunctious wrestling with the kids, etc. Ricky was a high-spirited dog and would zoom around the house at least twice a day. Rather than consciously calming him down after play, the family often extended play until Ricky collapsed tired. When he did rest, it was always in someone's lap or at their feet; he was *physically* seldom alone even within the house.

The trigger – a major transition: When Ricky was about 14 months old, the world began opening up and the parents had to return to working outside the home full-time. The children went back to in-person school as well. Quite suddenly, Ricky went from round-the-clock company to being left alone in the house for 7–8 hours a day. The family expected he'd be a bit sad at first, but they assumed he'd adjust. Instead, Ricky's reaction was immediate and extreme. On the very first day, neighbors reported that Ricky barked and howled continuously for hours. When the family came home, they found scratch marks on the front door and puddles of drool on the floor by the door – Ricky had been salivating and panting in a panic. He greeted them in an over-the-top frenzy, jumping and whining, clearly distressed. The second day was even worse: Ricky tore apart a throw pillow and chewed the windowsill, and had defecated in the hallway (something he never did when people were home). It was as if all the pent-up anxiety exploded now that he was truly alone and didn't know how to cope.

Escalation and failed fixes: Alarmed, Ricky's owners tried to contain the damage. They decided to start crating him when they left, thinking it would keep him from destroying things and perhaps make him feel secure. However, because they had hardly crate-trained him as a pup, Ricky viewed the crate as unfamiliar and possibly aversive. When they crated him on Day 3 and left, he had a severe panic episode – he thrashed and bent the crate's bars, managing to pry the door open and bloodying his gums and paws in the process. A neighbor later told them she heard high-pitched screaming (likely Ricky hurting himself while trying to escape). The crate experiment traumatized Ricky further; now, not only was he terrified when alone, he specifically associated the crate with that terror. The owners felt terrible and stopped using the crate, but the damage was done.

Desperate, the family sought advice. A trainer suggested longer walks and leaving a Kong toy. They tried exhausting Ricky each morning with a big fetch session and left him a peanut butter Kong. It only half-worked: Ricky would eat the Kong's contents, then resume pacing and crying. He simply could not settle for the whole workday. The

family resorted to hiring a dog walker to come midday, which helped break up the time, but Ricky would still work himself up within an hour of being alone. In the afternoons before the walker came, he would often engage in stress behaviors – shredding any paper or object he could find, or clawing at the door where they exited. The problem was clearly beyond a quick fix.

The bigger picture: In Ricky's case, we can see how multiple factors contributed: (1) No early independence training – he was never gradually accustomed to solitude. (2) Owner attachment style – his family (particularly one of the owners who had anxiety about leaving him) inadvertently reinforced Ricky's own anxiety by coddling him and perhaps transmitting their worry whenever they departed. (3) Major routine change – the abrupt shift from never alone to alone all day was a shock to his system. (4) Overstimulation and hyper-attachment – Ricky's constant interactive lifestyle left him with no skills for self-soothing; he was essentially addicted to company and activity. (5) Misuse of the crate – introducing the crate in the midst of panic without prior conditioning led to further trauma. It's easy to see how Ricky's scenario is not uncommon. Many loving owners, especially during pandemic times, followed a similar pattern with their dogs out of pure love and circumstance.

Outcome: Eventually, Ricky's family sought a more holistic behavior intervention. With guidance, they began to implement a *Just Behaving*-like approach: establishing structure and calm routines. They started practicing leaving Ricky for very short intervals (even just 5 minutes) and always returning low-key, to rebuild his trust that departures are temporary. They incorporated "alone time" when family was actually home – for example, having Ricky stay in a relaxed down-stay on his bed while they were in another room, so he learned he can handle not being glued to them at every moment. They also dialed down the high-intensity play, replacing some fetch sessions with calm walks and training games that worked his mind without getting him over-aroused. Over weeks, Ricky showed improvement: he could handle being alone for an hour, then two, without melting down. It took patience and consistency, but by combining gradual desensitization to solitude, structured leadership (the owners set boundaries like ignoring Ricky's anxious shadowing behavior at home and rewarding independent, calm behaviors), and creating positive associations (special long-lasting chews given only when alone), Ricky eventually overcame the worst of his separation distress. He may always be a dog that prefers company (as most dogs do), but he can now tolerate alone time without panic – a huge win for his welfare and the family's peace of mind.

Ricky's story encapsulates the themes we've discussed: early life, human influence, transitions, lifestyle, and conventional attempts (like just exercise or a Kong) that weren't sufficient on their own. It underscores that solving separation issues often requires a *comprehensive change* in how the dog is managed and how the humans behave – essentially a philosophical shift, not just a training technique. This leads us to

our next section: how the Just Behaving philosophy offers an alternative framework to prevent and address separation-related distress by focusing on mentorship, calmness, and structure from the start.

Rethinking Prevention and Solutions: The Just Behaving Approach

Separation-related distress is a complex issue, but its very complexity hints at the solution: a holistic, relationship-centered approach rather than a narrow training “trick.” The *Just Behaving* philosophy embodies this kind of approach. Rather than treating separation anxiety as an isolated problem (to be fixed with, say, a single desensitization protocol or a pill), Just Behaving suggests we consider the *entire context* of the dog’s upbringing and daily life. The goal is to raise and guide dogs in a way that naturally prevents anxiety from taking root, and to address existing issues by fundamentally reshaping the dog’s sense of security and trust. This means blending practical techniques (like structured exercises) with emotional and developmental understanding (like recognizing a dog’s attachment needs) and even philosophical reflection (examining our own mindset and the human–dog bond).

Here we outline key principles of the Just Behaving approach as they relate to preventing or alleviating separation distress. These principles mirror the “five pillars” of the philosophy – mentorship, calmness, indirect guidance, structured leadership, and prevention – all of which contribute to a well-adjusted, secure dog. We will see that a dog raised under these principles is, almost by definition, *less likely* to develop severe separation anxiety. And for a dog like Ricky who already has issues, applying these concepts can gradually lead to improvement by changing the dog’s internal mindset, not just their external behavior.

Building Secure Attachment Through Leadership and Mentorship

At the heart of Just Behaving is the notion of the owner as a calm mentor and leader, rather than just a caretaker or playmate. This kind of owner-dog relationship closely parallels what attachment theory calls a “secure base.” The dog views the owner as a reliable, steady presence – one who provides guidance, sets boundaries, and fulfills needs in a consistent way. Achieving this requires the human to sometimes step back from purely indulging the dog’s every whim and instead focus on what the dog *needs* for long-term confidence.

How does this help with separation? A dog with a secure attachment is *confident in the stability of the relationship*. They trust that the owner will return because the owner has proven themselves reliable. One way Just Behaving fosters this is through structured daily routines and rules that gently reinforce the human’s leadership. For example, a Just Behaving household might have a rule that the dog sleeps in its own bed, or that the dog waits calmly while the owner prepares its food rather than jumping. These

sound like minor obedience points, but collectively they communicate to the dog: *“You have a trustworthy leader who sets the rules. You don’t have to control everything; you can relax under my guidance.”* Dogs actually find comfort in clear structure. By providing that, the owner becomes a source of security. Studies have shown that dogs are more resilient and exploratory when they have a solid bond with a human who acts predictably and supportively. In practice, a dog that sees its owner as a mentor will be less prone to frantic panic when that mentor is temporarily away – because the foundation of trust has been laid.

Just Behaving also utilizes mentorship from other dogs when possible (for instance, puppies raised around calm adult dogs learn by example that being alone occasionally or being calm is normal). In a family setting with one dog, the human essentially doubles as the “older dog” role model. This means the owner should model calm behavior in various situations. If the owner leaves the house in a calm, matter-of-fact way and returns the same way, the dog learns by example that leaving and returning are routine events, not crises. Mentorship also means correcting the dog’s behavior in subtle, non-emotional ways (what Just Behaving calls indirect correction) so that the dog learns boundaries without fear. For a dog prone to separation anxiety, an example might be indirectly discouraging overly needy behavior: if the dog is constantly pawing for attention, the owner may stand up and move (removing attention gently) instead of coddling, thereby teaching the dog it’s okay not to be glued to the human every second. These small mentorship moments add up to a dog that can self-regulate better.

The philosophical edge here is the shift from a human-centered emotional response (“Oh, he needs me, I feel so bad, I’ll just give in”) to a dog-centered one (“What does my dog need to learn so he can be happier in the long run?”). Just Behaving encourages owners to ask that tough question – are my actions easing my *own* guilt or actually helping my dog?. For prevention of separation issues, often the hard but loving choice is to practice leaving the dog even if you hate to hear a whine, because you know it’s teaching the dog an important life skill. In mentorship, the owner sometimes must be a bit like a parent who doesn’t give the child candy every time they cry; it’s done not to withhold love, but to teach resilience.

Emphasizing Calmness as the Default

If there is one word that appears repeatedly in the Just Behaving philosophy, it is calm. Calmness is considered the foundation of a balanced dog. From puppyhood onward, Just Behaving advocates *actively cultivating a calm demeanor* in the dog. This directly counters the overstimulation problem discussed earlier. By reinforcing calm behavior, the dog’s neural pathways for relaxation get stronger.

In practical terms, how do we encourage calmness? One strategy is to normalize low-key togetherness – what we’ve termed structured companionship. Instead of always

engaging the dog in high-energy play when we're around, we sometimes just share space quietly. For example, if you're working at home, you intentionally have the dog lie on a bed near you rather than feeling obligated to entertain the dog constantly. If the dog settles calmly, you might occasionally reward that with a gentle pet or a treat, reinforcing that *being calm is rewarding*. Families can schedule "downtime" sessions where everyone in the living room is doing quiet activities and the dog is just hanging out. This sounds simple, but many households inadvertently never give the dog that experience because the dog is always either the center of attention or completely alone. Just Behaving would have you incorporate the dog into daily life in a *tranquil* way: the dog can be with you, but doesn't need to be the focus at all times.

Another technique is using calm cues and low-arousal training. For instance, teaching a solid "stay" or "place" command helps in two ways: it trains obedience and also requires the dog to practice staying put calmly until released. This skill can later be leveraged for gradually increasing distance (you can have the dog stay while you walk to another room briefly, building independence). Just Behaving trainers often avoid revving dogs up with too much excited praise or high-pitched cues; instead they use low, soothing tones and even deliberate silence at times. If a dog is slightly anxious or confused, a Just Behaving mentor might simply pause and be quiet, allowing the dog to think and settle rather than flooding the dog with chatter or frantic reassurance. This approach nurtures an overall lower baseline of arousal.

For a dog with existing separation issues, a focus on calmness might involve desensitizing the stimuli that trigger excitement or anxiety. Many dogs get anxious when they sense the owner is about to leave (they see the shoes, the coat, the keys). The usual protocol of systematic desensitization aligns well with Just Behaving: you would deliberately expose the dog to those cues without leaving, in a calm manner, until the dog no longer reacts fearfully (e.g., jingle keys randomly throughout the day with no departure until keys mean nothing). But beyond that, the owner must examine *all* interactions. If outside of training sessions the owner still does dramatic exits or returns, the progress will be halting. So Just Behaving would have the owner practice the mantra of "*calm, calm, calm*" across the board. For example, if the doorbell usually makes the house chaotic and the dog goes into a frenzy, implementing calm leadership in that scenario (maybe having the dog sit and wait while the door is answered) indirectly helps the dog learn to not spike into adrenaline so easily. Why mention doorbells in a separation anxiety plan? Because every context where the dog learns to remain composed feeds into their overall emotional stability.

Creating a calm environment also extends to providing safe, cozy spaces for the dog to retreat. As discussed, a crate or a specific room can be a helpful tool *if introduced properly*. The Just Behaving approach would introduce the crate as a positive place early on – feeding meals in it, leaving the door open and tossing treats in, making it a

“zen zone” for the puppy. By adulthood, a dog that loves its crate often chooses to nap there on its own. Such a dog, when left alone, has an immediate coping mechanism: go to the crate and relax, just as they’ve always done when nothing is happening. This can significantly prevent panic. If a crate isn’t used, having a designated “safe spot” like a certain bed or mat can serve a similar role. The idea is to condition a relaxation response. Some owners even incorporate a particular scent (like a lavender-scented toy or a piece of clothing) that they present only during calm downtime, so it becomes an olfactory cue to chill. These are small thoughtful measures that stem from viewing the dog’s experience empathetically – something Just Behaving encourages. We want the dog’s perspective to be considered: *How does my dog feel when I’m gone, and what would help him feel safe?* Perhaps the radio playing soft classical music, or a familiar blanket – often these are suggested, but they work best in conjunction with an overall calm routine at other times.

Gradual Independence Training and Prevention

Just Behaving heavily emphasizes prevention – setting puppies up for success so they never learn the “wrong” behavior or emotional response in the first place. For separation anxiety, prevention is truly easier than cure (though as Ricky’s case shows, cure is possible with effort). Preventive steps have been touched on: don’t adopt out puppies too young, do gradually accustom pups to being alone, etc. Let’s outline a structured preventive gameplan through the Just Behaving lens:

- **Start early:** From day one in a new home, practice little separations. For example, the 9-week-old puppy is gated in the kitchen with a chew toy while you take a shower. It might cry a bit, but when you return (after just 5–10 minutes), wait for a lull in the crying and calmly re-enter, reward quiet. This teaches the puppy that *you leaving is not permanent and not the end of the world*. It’s crucial these first separations are short and *not* traumatic. We want no “flooding” (do not leave a baby puppy alone for 8 hours as a training method – that will likely cause trauma). Instead, incremental expansion of alone time, with consistency. By the time the pup is a few months old, they should be content to chill alone for an hour or two, because they’ve done it many times.
- **Use confinement wisely:** Employ a crate or play-pen from the start as the puppy’s den. This prevents destructive habits and builds the association of confinement with relaxation (not punishment). If the puppy naps in the crate regularly, when you need to crate and leave for a short grocery run, the pup is in familiar territory. As one Just Behaving guide noted, many JB dogs eventually don’t even need the crate closed – they voluntarily go to their “place” to relax. This is the ideal scenario: the dog sees their space as their personal bedroom, a

safe haven. Then being alone is simply being “in my room for a bit,” not being “banished.”

- **Normalize coming and going:** Families can make it a habit that not everyone fawns over the dog whenever they walk in the door. Perhaps designate that the first 5 minutes at home, people will put away groceries or settle in before giving the dog lots of attention (assuming the dog is reasonably calm and safe). This isn't to be cold; it's to avoid huge contrast where absence = misery and presence = wild party. By keeping greetings low-key, the dog learns to take comings and goings in stride. Similarly, departures can have a routine that is uneventful: maybe the dog is always given a chew and placed on their mat, and the owner simply says a short “Be good, see you later” and leaves without long goodbyes. Dogs do pick up routines quickly – if every weekday at 8:30am the owner goes out, and it's done consistently and calmly, the dog will often adjust their expectations accordingly (many will actually sleep through most of the day once they accept the pattern).
- **Prevent problematic dependency behaviors:** If a puppy or young dog shows signs of hyper-attachment (e.g., following incessantly, whining when you go to another floor), a Just Behaving approach nips that in the bud kindly. One might use baby gates to sometimes spatially separate – for instance, you cook in the kitchen while the puppy is gated in the adjacent room with some toys. The puppy can see you, maybe whines a bit, but learns they don't have to be underfoot and that whining doesn't immediately result in reunification. Then you periodically return to reward calm quiet behavior. Essentially, *teach the dog that independent time brings rewards too*. Some owners will make a habit of occasionally leaving the house for literally 1 minute (walk to mailbox) without the dog, even if they don't need to, just to practice. It's like exercising a muscle – the more reps, the stronger the dog's tolerance.
- **Expose to varied social contexts:** A dog that is only ever comfortable with their one owner and terrified of everything else is more likely to have separation issues. Just Behaving encourages *well-rounded socialization* – meaning the dog should meet other people, dogs, go places, etc., all in a controlled positive way, to build confidence. If a dog has other enjoyable social outlets (like playdates with a neighbor's dog, or is friendly with family friends), then the owner's absence is not as earth-shattering – the dog can be happy with other company too. This is particularly relevant if a dog's primary attachment figure must leave for a while; having secondary attachments (other family members the dog likes) can buffer the anxiety. So families should avoid the trap of only one person handling all care. Spread the love – let the dog bond with multiple members or pet sitters, etc., so they are less “one-person-dependent.”

Ultimately, prevention in Just Behaving comes down to never letting the unwanted behavior or extreme anxiety become rehearsed. By managing a puppy's environment so carefully, the pup never has the chance to freak out alone because we don't put them in a position to do so without preparation. Contrast this with the common scenario of, "We never left Fido alone, but now we suddenly have to, and he's losing it." Prevention says: assume you *will* eventually have to leave Fido alone, so teach him young.

Addressing Existing Separation Anxiety Through Lifestyle Change

If prevention time has passed and a dog is already in the throes of separation distress, the approach shifts to rehabilitation – but the principles remain similar. It's not just about training the dog; it's also often about training the owners to implement a new lifestyle. The case of Ricky demonstrated that the owners had to change their ways (calmer departures, less constant attention, more structure) for Ricky to improve. This can be challenging for owners set in their routines or who feel guilty. A *philosophical buy-in* is needed: the owner must believe that adjusting their own habits is in the dog's best interest, even if it's hard for them emotionally or requires effort.

A comprehensive plan for an anxious dog often includes: desensitization and counterconditioning (gradually accustom the dog to being alone, and pairing alone time with something positive like special treats), possibly medical support (in severe cases, vet-prescribed anxiolytic medications or calming pheromones can help take the edge off while training is implemented, as indicated by a reduction in anxiety for many dogs en.wikipedia.org en.wikipedia.org), and crucially, day-to-day management to avoid triggering the dog in the meantime (e.g., using dog daycare or a pet sitter so the dog isn't repeatedly traumatized by long absences during training). These are standard behavior modification steps and would be utilized in Just Behaving as well. But what sets a Just Behaving approach apart is the focus on the *relationship and environment beyond the alone-time training sessions*.

For example, a conventional trainer might focus on practicing departures with the dog (which is good), but might not discuss with the owner that they need to stop letting the dog sleep in their bed if the dog is highly attached. Just Behaving would gently suggest that maybe the dog sleeping on its own bed could help build a tiny bit of independence each night. Or that the owner practice not giving in to every demand for play instantly, teaching the dog patience. These small adjustments teach the dog to tolerate not always being the center of attention, making actual absences less of a shock. Another aspect is consistency: everyone in the household should be on the same page. If one person is doing the training but another continues to throw a goodbye party for the dog each time, progress will stall. So part of the approach is educating and aligning the family's behavior.

Let's outline a few key strategies in implementing the Just Behaving model for an anxious dog:

- **Normalize signals of departure:** Do the things you normally do before leaving (grab keys, put on coat) at random times with no actual departure. This is textbook desensitization. The Just Behaving twist is to do it *casually*. Don't even look at the dog or say anything – just jingle keys while you walk through the house, then set them down. If the dog is very anxious watching you, you might toss a treat and then jingle keys, to break the association. Over days, the dog stops reacting to keys, coat, shoes because they no longer always predict a scary event. This reduces the anticipatory anxiety dramatically.
- **Short absences with immediate return:** Begin with intervals so short the dog doesn't have time to get truly upset – even 30 seconds. The idea is to rack up successes (dog stays calm = treat when you return). Then build to 1 minute, 2 minutes, 5, etc., always keeping below the panic threshold. This process can take weeks or more to extend to hours. Patience is key. Throughout, maintain the same calm routine – a phrase like “I'll be back” said in a neutral tone, leave, come back, calmly praise or give a treat if the dog was quiet. If the dog cried or had an accident even at a short duration, you went too fast – shorten it further or add an intermediate step like the dog in a room with door closed while you are actually still home (so they experience separation without full absence).
- **Reward independence and calm at home:** Catch the dog when he chooses to lie down away from you, and praise that. If the dog is chilling across the room, toss a treat his way. Conversely, if the dog is constantly glued to you, gently encourage a bit of space: for instance, institute a rule that the dog can't be in the bathroom or kitchen with you. Not because those rooms are magical, but to set a precedent that sometimes you are behind a door and the dog survives. They learn to wait. Initially the dog might fuss, but if ignored (and if needed, given a safe chew on the other side of the gate), they learn it's a non-event.
- **Address any other anxiety triggers:** Many dogs with separation anxiety have *comorbid issues* like noise phobia or general fear. A holistic plan addresses those too, because a more confident dog in general is less likely to be anxious alone. For instance, if thunder scares the dog, work on thunder desensitization. The more overall stability and confidence we can give the dog, the better.
- **Avoid punishment or harsh corrections:** This is non-negotiable – punishing anxiety-fueled behaviors will backfire en.wikipedia.org. Just Behaving leans toward *indirect correction* which in this context means redirecting or managing rather than scolding. If the dog is whining for attention, rather than yelling “Quiet!”, one might calmly stand up and walk away (a form of negative

punishment by removing attention). It sends a clearer message without adding fear. Given anxious dogs are often sensitive, maintaining a tone of calm even when they do something undesirable (like peeing on the floor) is important. Clean it up without drama; save the “correction” for a time you can guide the dog before the mistake (e.g., proactively take them out to potty, so you set them up to succeed and praise).

- **Owner self-regulation:** Perhaps one of the hardest aspects is coaching the *owners* to manage their own emotions. Some owners become very frustrated (“Why can’t he just be calm?!”), while others become very sympathetic (“Oh poor baby, he was so upset, it breaks my heart.”). Both extremes can hinder progress. The frustrated owner may inadvertently show anger or disappointment, which the dog senses, adding stress. The over-sympathetic owner might baby the dog too much, reinforcing that something was indeed “wrong” during absence. Just Behaving would counsel an owner to project a confident, matter-of-fact energy. The attitude is: “This is no big deal, I know you can do this.” Owners sometimes need to fake it until they make it – even if internally worried, they should behave as if everything is under control. Given dogs are attuned to us, an owner’s steady vibe can reassure an anxious dog better than excessive fussing. Some owners even practice breathing exercises or adopt a departure ritual for themselves (like thinking of something non-stressful) to ensure they aren’t telegraphing anxiety to the dog.

Taken together, these strategies form an integrated approach that aligns with Just Behaving’s pillars: the owner leads with calm confidence (Structured Leadership), guides the dog patiently rather than forcing (Indirect Correction and Mentorship), actively rewards calm behavior (Calmness pillar), and aims to prevent rehearsal of panic (Prevention pillar). It is not a quick fix – no truly effective separation anxiety treatment is overnight. But it addresses root causes, not just symptoms. Over time, as the dog experiences more and more *successful* alone periods (where nothing bad happens, and maybe good things happen like yummy treats), their underlying emotion shifts from terror to tolerance, perhaps even to a mild contentment or routine.

One more dimension is worth mentioning: enrichment and fulfillment. A dog that is fulfilled overall (adequate exercise, mental stimulation, social interaction when owners are home) will be more likely to rest when alone. Just Behaving doesn’t mean depriving the dog of fun – it encourages *purposeful* fun. For example, instead of chaotic dog park visits that might overstimulate, the owner might take the dog on a calm hike or practice scent games in the yard. A well-stimulated (but not overstimulated) dog is a *tired, happy dog*, and a tired dog will naturally sleep during an absence. Many separation anxiety cases are made worse by excess energy with no outlet. So part of a holistic plan is ensuring the dog’s needs are met: plenty of exercise (tailored to the dog), opportunities

to chew (chewing is a calming activity for dogs), and interactive play *on the owner's terms*. *Just Behaving* philosophy integrates this by scheduling these things intelligently. For instance, a play session or brisk walk in the morning *before* a long departure can take the edge off the dog's energy (just be sure to cool down into calm mode before you actually leave, as noted). In the evening, a training session or gentle play gives the dog attention so they don't feel starved for interaction after being alone. This way, the dog's life is balanced – periods of engagement and periods of rest. Eventually the dog can predict: "I chill out alone now, but later we'll have our walk or cuddle." Predictability itself is soothing to animals en.wikipedia.org.

Discussion and Conclusions

Separation-related distress in family dogs is a multifaceted problem rooted in both canine nature and human culture. As we have seen, its prevalence in modern pet dogs is high, fueled by lifestyle patterns that put dogs in challenging social isolation scenarios pursuit.unimelb.edu.au nihrecord.nih.gov. We examined how a range of factors – from early life experiences like premature separation or lack of independence training, to owner behaviors shaped by attachment styles, to major life changes such as rehoming or routine shifts, to overstimulating lifestyles – all contribute to a dog's likelihood of developing separation anxiety. Each dog's story may be unique, but the patterns are strikingly common.

Our deep dive into these causes makes one thing clear: there is no single, simple solution, no "magic pill" or one-size-fits-all fix for separation distress. Quick-fix approaches, like just upping exercise or just using a food toy, often fail to resolve the core issue if used in isolation. Likewise, traditional training that ignores the dog's emotional state – for example, expecting obedience to override panic, or punishing unwanted behaviors – is misguided and can even be counterproductive en.wikipedia.org. Dogs are not robots; telling a terrified dog to "sit-stay" as you leave doesn't address the fear (and if enforced harshly, could make the dog even more anxious). What's needed is a paradigm shift in how we understand and mentor our dogs.

The *Just Behaving* philosophy offers that paradigm shift by asking us to blend science with heart, and practicality with philosophy. It challenges us to step back and consider the *system* surrounding the dog, not just the dog's symptoms. It invites us to be proactive – to raise puppies in a prevention-focused manner so that issues like separation anxiety never gain a foothold. And it urges us to reflect on our own human tendencies: Are we doing something for the dog, or because of our own emotions? For instance, we might realize that we prolong our goodbyes not for the dog's sake (it actually upsets the dog more) but for our *own* emotional comfort. Such self-awareness is a philosophical angle that makes the Just Behaving approach especially thoughtful.

It's not about blame; it's about recognizing that good intentions can sometimes lead us astray, and that we have to be humble and adapt for the good of our dogs.

One of the refreshing aspects of this approach is that it welcomes discussion and reflection. Rather than prescribing a rigid protocol to be followed blindly, it encourages each dog-owner pair to find the balance that works for them, within the guiding principles. For example, not every dog needs to sleep outside the owner's bedroom – some may do fine on a dog bed in the bedroom. The key principle is the dog should learn to sleep through the night apart from direct physical contact, but exactly how that's achieved can vary. Owners are encouraged to observe their dog's responses and adjust accordingly (with the help of professionals when needed).

This open, reflective style is especially important because every dog is an individual. Some dogs have genetic predispositions to anxiety; some have medical issues that exacerbate stress; some have had extreme traumas that require extra patience. A mentorship philosophy means you work with the dog in front of you, not an idealized dog. It also means progress is measured not just in elimination of bad behaviors but in the dog's overall wellbeing. Is the dog's quality of life improving? Is the family's bond with the dog improving? Those are just as important as whether the couch stays intact during absences.

We should also acknowledge the role of veterinary and behavior professionals in tackling separation distress. A veterinarian can rule out medical issues that might cause house soiling or vocalization (such as incontinence or deafness) and can discuss whether short-term use of anti-anxiety medication is warranted. A certified applied animal behaviorist or a positive reinforcement trainer with experience in separation cases can coach the step-by-step desensitization plan and troubleshoot setbacks. The Just Behaving approach is not at odds with these interventions – rather, it encompasses them into a larger framework. For instance, using a pheromone diffuser (DAP/Adaptil) or medication can be seen as creating a calmer baseline (tying into the Calmness pillar) to enable the training to proceed more smoothly en.wikipedia.org en.wikipedia.org. Similarly, a vet behaviorist might help identify if there are co-morbid anxieties needing treatment. In an academic sense, integrating multidisciplinary expertise (veterinary, ethological, psychological) is exactly what a holistic philosophy promotes.

For trainers and behaviorists reading this, the Just Behaving perspective might resonate as a return to some fundamental concepts that sometimes get lost in the focus on specific protocols: the importance of consistent leadership (not dominance, but dependable guidance), the power of simply reinforcing the behaviors and states (like calmness) that we want, and the necessity of preventing rehearsal of the unwanted behavior. These are time-honored ideas in behavior modification, reframed here in an accessible philosophy for pet owners. What Just Behaving adds is an emphasis on

empathy and mutual respect – reminding us that the goal is a harmonious relationship, not just a “fixed dog.” In the case of separation anxiety, this means success is not just measured by “dog stays quiet when alone,” but also by “dog is overall more at peace, and owner is more at peace, because their relationship has more understanding and structure.”

For thoughtful pet owners, the message is empowering. Even if your dog is struggling with something as daunting as separation anxiety, there is hope. By making changes in how you interact and taking gradual steps, you *can* help your dog improve. It requires consistency and compassion. It might involve challenging yourself – perhaps curbing your impulse to always comfort and instead sometimes channeling a calm, confident demeanor that your dog can feed off. It certainly involves paying close attention to your dog’s body language and signals; your dog is communicating volumes if you learn to listen. The approach outlined here is not a quick recipe, but a journey of growth for both dog and owner. Along that journey, it’s okay to have doubts and to adjust course. Maybe one tactic isn’t working – we re-evaluate and try another, always anchored by the core principles of calm, structured, loving guidance.

In wrapping up, it’s worth reflecting on a broader point: separation-related distress, at its core, underscores how deep the dog-human bond truly is. The fact that so many dogs experience such anxiety when away from us is a testament to the strength of their attachment. This is simultaneously heartwarming and heartbreaking. Heartwarming because it means our dogs genuinely love and need us; heartbreaking because that love can turn into suffering in our modern context. As guardians of dogs, it is our responsibility to guide that bond in a healthy direction – to teach our dogs that our bond doesn’t break when we’re apart. We want them to feel secure enough in our relationship that they can close their eyes and sleep while we’re gone, confident we will return. Achieving this is not just about training a dog, it’s about nurturing trust.

The Just Behaving philosophy, with its blend of academic insight and gentle wisdom, gives us a roadmap for nurturing that trust. It reminds us that every interaction with our dog is a lesson, for better or worse. By being intentional and compassionate in those interactions, we can prevent many problems and solve those that do arise with empathy. A dog who “just behaves” calmly and confidently when alone is not one that was drilled in obedience, but one that was mentored to feel at ease in its world.

In conclusion, separation-related distress in family dogs is best addressed not by a single tool or trick, but by an integrated philosophy of caregiving. When we raise dogs with a prevention mindset, meet their needs for structure and calm leadership, and examine our own role in their emotional lives, we create the conditions for them to handle solitude without fear. This paper has aimed to provide a comprehensive look at the issue, backed by scientific research and illuminated by the Just Behaving approach.

The hope is that it sparks further discussion: among veterinarians devising behavior plans, among trainers balancing technique with empathy, and among owners reflecting on how to better support their canine companions. Separation anxiety is a challenging problem, but it also can be a catalyst for us to become better caregivers – more aware, more patient, and more attuned to our dogs. In solving it, we don't just teach our dogs to be okay alone; we enrich the bond we share with them when we are together. And ultimately, that bond – built on trust and understanding – is what will carry us and our dogs through any temporary separation with confidence and peace.