

Separation Anxiety in Dogs

by Anita Fahrenwald

(c) 1994 [Permission has been given for reproducing]

The following program is adapted from the work and writings of John Rogerson (Northern Centre for Animal Behaviour) and Julie Sellors (Blue Cross Animal Welfare Society) in England.

Separation anxiety is common in rehomed dogs, especially those that have had more than one home in their first year of life (not including their birth home). Owners may also unintentionally create separation anxiety in puppies raised entirely in one home or a newly adopted dog by giving it constant attention during the early weeks. Later on, when the novelty wears off and the puppy or dog must spend more time alone, he may become nervous when left alone, which can then escalate into separation anxiety. Yes, dogs need attention; but they do not need constant attention. You probably know the saying: "Too much of a good thing . . ."

Characteristics of Separation Anxiety

- * The dog is not comfortable staying in a room by himself when the owner is home. He follows the owner from room to room and becomes upset if prevented from doing so (by a barrier of some kind).
- * Typically, the dog builds a strong bond with one member of a family.
- * Many dogs will begin their destruction almost immediately after being left alone.
- * Some dogs may show physiological signs of fear, such as increased heart and breathing rate, panting, salivating, increased activity, and urinating and/or defecating.
- * After the initial frantic period, the dog may settle down to chew something the owners have recently touched or worn and may then curl up in the midst of the debris. In milder forms of anxiety, little or no destruction occurs -- the dog collects the owner's personal belongings and merely curls up with them.

The problem may be further intensified by the owner pleading with the dog to "please be good" in an anxious tone of voice when leaving the house. Punishment for anxiety-related destruction only makes the problem worse. Not only is the dog anxious about the owner leaving, but he also becomes anxious about the owner returning.

Program to Reduce Separation Anxiety

The following stages should be undertaken when you have some time to spend at home, such as on a weekend.

Stages

- * Stage 1 - Introduce mental separation. Completely ignore the dog for a period of 30 minutes while in the same room. Ignoring means: do not touch, look at, or speak to the dog.
- * Stage 2 - Introduce physical separation. Restrict the dog's access to you. This could be done with the use of a tether which the dog cannot chew through. Combine with mental separation.
- * Stage 3 - Increase the distance of the physical separation. The dog is tethered further from you, but still within sight. Combine with mental separation.
- * Stage 4 - Cut off dog's visual contact with you within the same room. He cannot see you, but he can smell you and hear you.
- * Stage 5 - Move dog into another room while you are still home. Dog can still hear you and smell you. You might also place a recently worn article of clothing along with the dog.

What To Do in the Meantime

* Restrict dog to a good sized room or place where he normally is & can do minimal damage. Be sure there are no electrical cords within reach. Do not put dog in any room & close the door! Use dog gates or other type of see-through barriers.

* If your dog is toy oriented, classify the dog's toys into "A" and "B" groups. "A" toys are those that are irresistible, and the "B" toys are those that he likes but are less exciting. When you leave him, give him several "B" toys. These will help keep him occupied without over stimulating him.

* Exercise your dog well in advance of your departure. If he is tired, he may sleep while you are gone (also see the "Tracking Game" below).

* Feed him a small meal about 45 minutes to an hour before leaving.

* IGNORE your dog for the 30 minutes before you leave home, and do not say good- bye.

* When you return, ignore your dog for the first ten minutes. If you cannot bring yourself to totally ignore him, at least keep your greeting very low key.

The Tracking Game

If you have some spare time before leaving the house, here is a game that puts your dog 'to work', providing him with mental stimulation and exercise. Have him 'track' for his meal. Divide your dog's meal into about 10 portions. Take them into the yard (allowing him to watch, but not accompany you) and hide his entire meal all over the yard. (Be realistic - don't hide a portion in a flower pot up on a table - - you would be encouraging destruction in order to find the food!) Then help the dog find his meal. You can stand back and see how much he can do on his own, or you could lead him a bit to help get him started.

Once he gets the idea, you can use this game to mentally and physically exercise your dog before you go out. About 45 minutes to an hour before you are to leave, hide your dog's meal around the yard. Then leave him to himself to find it. The mental stimulation and physical exercise help to induce sleepiness later on. After he has found and eaten his meal, be sure to follow the guidelines for ignoring him for the 30 minutes prior to your leaving.

Before trying the tracking game, you may first need to work through the stages of mental and physical separation.

Separation anxiety is preventable by simply teaching the dog to stay quietly alone for short periods of time. It can be cured with time and patience using the progressions outlined above.