



Peninsula Humane Society & SPCA

Separation Anxiety... or Separation Fun?

Cause Many dogs whine, bark, scratch at the door or destroy your home and yard when left alone. We often unintentionally train our dogs to behave this way. Whenever the dog throws a tantrum when we leave, we quickly come back to reassure the dog, or even give a biscuit or bone, thinking this will give her something to do while we're away. The dog soon learns that she can control you with emotional blackmail. We also add to the problem by having long, drawn-out emotional farewells before leaving. This only excites the dog and makes the isolation more obvious. The dog is worked up and ready to play, then suddenly you disappear. Then, he either makes a fuss so that you will come back, or vents his energy some other way -- chewing, digging and barking are favorites. We think she does this to show anger for being left alone, but she's really just trying to have fun since there is nothing else to do.

Some dogs are nervous and insecure when left alone. This problem is especially common during the first few weeks in a new home. They express nervous energy the same way -- digging and barking, as well as housesoiling.

Treatment Your dog needs to feel happy, secure and comfortable when you're away. Provide her with lots of toys or a digging pit in the yard. Often, another companion animal can help alleviate boredom, but be careful. Adding another dog to your household to make up for your lack of time for the first dog is usually a mistake.

When you're home, set aside time to give your dog undivided attention, play and exercise. A happy, well-exercised dog will usually sleep well during the day while you're gone. Be sure that one of the scheduled play sessions occurs before you leave for the day. Let your dog settle down, then leave without emotion or commotion.

If your dog is not used to being left alone, or if she already has panic attacks when you leave, you need to gradually accustom her to your leaving. Practice leaving and returning several times so she gets used to your departures and realizes that you will come home. Gradually, leave for longer periods, but start with leaving for a few minutes before returning. Spend the weekend leaving and returning at varying intervals and for varying periods of time. Go through your usual departure routine each time -- turn on the answering machine, lock the back door, pick up your keys, etc. Say a calm good-bye and hand Fido a biscuit. The idea is for her to associate these actions with good things, such as a treat and a short absence on your part.

Each separation anxiety behavior needs to be explored individually, but there are some things that will help any of these behaviors.

Set up a routine

- feed on a schedule
- supervise elimination
- quality interaction with family members
- groom
- train
- socialize with other dogs and with things that are unfamiliar to the dog

Attend a training class

- exposes the dog to new people and dogs in a controlled environment
- the dog will learn basic commands
- the dog's confidence will increase
- speeds up the bonding process between the dog and family members

Leave the dog with interactive toys that will keep him occupied, such as kongs (thick, hollow rubber toy available in several sizes) - rub the inside with peanut butter, cream cheese or honey, or stuff the kong with kibble and a few small pieces of cheese.

For more info, call our free Behavior Helpline (650/340-7022 x783 or, for Spanish, x786) or consider a low-cost consultation. To make a consultation appointment, call 650/340-7022 x667. The PHS/SPCA Behavior Department, like many shelter programs, is funded by donations.