



## Separation Issues

Dogs vary in their ability to cope with being left alone. Some dogs are relaxed about it but for others, it can cause great anxiety and stress. Dogs from rescue centres have often had very disrupted lives and this can cause them to feel even more insecure.

Destructive behaviour, soiling in the home, self-mutilation and persistent barking are often signs that a dog is not coping with being left. These behaviours are used by some dogs to take their minds off stressful situations. Chewing releases hormones which help to make the dog feel better. They are not doing any of these things to be spiteful or deliberately troublesome and there is no point in punishing your dog for these behaviours once you have returned home. Your dog will not associate the punishment with the behaviour and therefore it will only add to the stress and anxiety that he/she feels when left. The result can be that you actually make the problem worse.

If your dog panics at being left even for just a few moments, it is not possible for you to consider leaving him/her for several hours. However, these problems can be overcome with some training.

Progress may appear slow at first but if you take your time in the early stages, you will find that your dog will learn to cope with being left and that it will be less stressful in the long term for all concerned.

The aim is to teach your dog that it is normal to be left for short periods of time and that you have not left him/her permanently.

Using the room where your dog will be left alone, place a baby gate in the doorway between this and the next room. This will allow your dog to hear and see you but not follow you around. Initially, only leave your dog for a few seconds. It is important that you do not teach your dog to associate your coming back into the room with him displaying anxiety and stressed behaviour. Therefore, make the early separations so short that you do not give your dog time to feel stressed. When you re-enter the room, do so without touching, speaking to or looking at your dog. Repeat this leaving and re-entering the room little and often. As your dog starts to relax

you can begin to increase the time that you leave the room for. If your dog shows signs of stress then reduce the time left to a level where he/she was previously able to cope.

If your dog displays any unwanted behaviour when you return to the room, do not look, touch or speak to him but quietly walk out again. Wait for a break in the behaviour and then return, again without making any contact with your dog. The purpose of this is to teach your dog to associate good behaviour (not unwanted behaviour) with you returning.

When your dog is displaying any unwanted behaviour it is very important that you do not give him/her any form of attention (including speaking to, touching or looking). To a stressed and anxious dog, pushing your dog away or even shouting can be seen as a reward and you can make the behaviour worse in the long term.

An indoor kennel (sometimes referred to as a cage or crate) can be used instead of the baby gate. However, if your dog is not used to one it is vital that they are introduced in the correct manner as it can be very traumatic for the dog to be locked in a confined space.

Most dogs find the first 20 minutes after you have left, the most stressful. Therefore, it may be helpful to leave things to distract your dog during this time:

- It may help to give your dog a rawhide chew or a stuffed Kong™ toy.
- Leave the radio on to provide background noise. However, keep it at a low volume and ensure that it is on a channel that does not play rousing music!
- Leaving items that you are happy for your dog to destroy whilst you are out can also help. As already mentioned, chewing helps the dog to feel better, therefore it is far better for them to chew things that you are not concerned about. It may also help if you leave something like an old t shirt that smells of you.

Make sure that when you leave and return to your dog that it is very casual and low key. It is important not to make these events a big deal in your dog's eyes by making a fuss and getting him/her overly excited.

**Remember that your dog is not destroying things to deliberately wind you up. Expect that in the early days, it is likely that something will be chewed and ensure that you do not leave valued items easily accessible.**