



Advice on Separation

Dogs are naturally pack animals and need to be taught to be left alone. Begin with short sessions and gradually build up to longer absences.

Does your dog become anxious when separated from you?

Dogs generally show anxiety in three different ways:

- *Destructiveness* e.g. chewing, biting, scratching, digging.
- *Vocalisation* Endless barking, whining, and/or howling can be a way of trying to maintain contact.
- *Defecation and urination*. These are due to anxiety and usually performed within minutes of your departure. Scolding the dog tends to make the dog more anxious thus exasperating the problem.

What can I do?

- As I explained above gradually increase the length of your absence. If your dog is very insecure about being in his own company (this is particularly common with re-homed dogs), begin with getting your dog used to being ignored, e.g. sit and read a book so that you are in your dog's company, but ignore the dog (don't even look at him) so that they learn to be settled without any interaction from you. During this time provide a suitable chew toy that is safe enough to leave with your dog if you were not supervising them e.g. a Nylabone or stuffed Kong.
- Change your departure routine, for example leave through a different door, or leave your coat in the car, don't tell your dog "be good" etc. This will prevent you unintentionally making your dog anxious before leaving the house. Some dogs become anxious just seeing these visual signs, which results in your dog's anxiety escalating into a panic once you leave. Similarly you can desensitize your dog to these visual clues by doing these actions several times a day (e.g. picking up your keys, putting on a coat, picking up your hand bag) but without actually going out or leaving him.
- Your presence/absence will be less marked if you ignore your dog completely for about 15 minutes before departure and again on return. Any reassurance from you e.g. stroking your dog or talking in a soft pleasant voice can be misinterpreted as praise which will encourage your dog to repeat his behavior. Similarly your dog will think that happy greetings on your return mean that you are also relieved and excited to be reunited. It is better to ignore your dog before and after your absence so that it is no big deal, and so that you do not unintentionally send any messages to your dog. It also makes your presence and absence less marked.
- Sometimes dogs can become bored. Give your dog a toy which is a novelty, e.g. a ball that releases treats. Dogs that are anxious, can sometimes channel their anxieties on a chew toy, and can be distracted, with a novelty toy or chew. Keep the toy a novelty by only giving it to your dog 20mins before you leave. (If you only give it to your dog as you depart they will associate it with feeling anxious which will then make it a negative object).

It is important that you never punish your dog for anything he has done in your absence as this will only increase his anxiety, and will make the problem worse next time you leave him and will damage your relationship with your dog. Remember that your dog is not behaving in this way out of spite to you, but is just trying to cope in ways that dogs do. In short he is behaving like a dog in a human world.