



Separation Fun

Recognizing and solving owner-absent behavior

Colorado Beagle Rescue, Inc.
PO Box 2704
Littleton CO 80161-2704

303-464-9403
www.ColoradoBeagleRescue.org

When dogs misbehave during an owner's absence, the problem is summarily labeled *separation anxiety*. In reality, a more apt and descriptive term would be *separation fun*. In most cases, the dog just cannot wait for the owner to go to work in the morning so that it can go to work on the house and indulge in a well-deserved chew, dig, leak or bark.

The problem is the product of an over reliance on punishment-oriented training methods. The dog misbehaves and the owner punishes the dog. Rather than learning the inappropriateness of its specific behavior, the dog learns that it is undesirable to misbehave in the owner's presence.

However, activities that humans consider misbehavior, dogs consider to be quite normal, natural and necessary. Since the dog dares not indulge in these doggy activities in the owner's presence, it simply waits for the owner to leave.

Separation anxiety is a nominal fallacy, whereby merely labeling the owner's perceived problem becomes the cheap alternative for really trying to understand the etiology, prevention and treatment of a dog's annoying behaviors in an attempt to arrive at a solution.

Excessive Punishment

Attempting to train a dog solely by punishing the dog's mistakes is a task of Sisyphean proportion—an everlasting and painfully laborious proposition. Pun-

ishment training is extremely ineffective, inefficient and unreliable. In fact, it often exacerbates existing problems and creates additional ones.

Severe problems are generated the first time the dog misbehaves and is not immediately punished. The dog has learned there are times it can act like a dog and get away with it, so it reserves its natural doggy behaviors for those specific times when the owner is 1) *physically absent* (away from home, upstairs asleep, taking a shower); 2) *physically present but mentally absent* (daydreaming, preoccupied, chatting with friends) or 3) *physically present but functionally absent* (in the obedience ring, in company, when holding a baby and a bag of groceries).

Delayed Punishment

Just because an owner cannot effectively punish the dog when it misbehaves does not necessarily mean that he will not punish the dog. Instead, the dog is punished when he returns home. As a result, many dogs do indeed become anxious when left alone. The anxiety is prompted by the prospect of the owner's return (and expected chastisement). Symptoms of anxiety are usually manifested by physical concomitants such as habitual activity (usually bad habits like barking, digging and chewing), and increased urination frequency and diarrhea.

Generally, punishment of any nature is hardly fun for either dog or owner and, specifically,

delayed punishment is extremely ineffective for resolving behavior problems and extremely effective at destroying the dog's temperament. An owner can punish the dog upon returning home, and the dog will continue misbehaving in the owner's absence. Moreover, each punishment progressively erodes the dog's trust and confidence in the owner. Continued use of delayed punishment promotes considerable antipathy and fear towards the owner.

On the other hand, reward-oriented methods require only a few days to resolve most behavior problems. Rather than beating the dog, why not just solve the simple (owner-created) behavior problem and, if the dog really becomes anxious when left alone, let's do something about it *pronto!*

Behavior Modification

First, prevent the dog's problem from further irritating the owner or neighbors, and second, actively set about re-training the dog. Either confine the dog to an area where its misbehavior causes minimal damage, or rustle up a dog-sitter to spend time with the dog until the problems are resolved.

If it is necessary for the dog to be left unattended for long periods of time, and if the dog is not yet reliable, confining the dog to a single room will limit potential damage to the confinement area. For example, an indiscriminant eliminator may be confined to the kitchen or a utility room—

areas with non-porous floors which may be kept papered. Thus, long-term confinement becomes a passive learning process whereby the dog becomes accustomed to eliminating on papers. The owner may then take along paper to encourage the dog to eliminate in its toilet area, and it can be used to wrap up and dispose of the waste products.

Similarly, by confining a potential chewer to an empty room littered with chew toys, the dog develops the habit of playing with chew toys (if only out of boredom and nothing else to do).

Excessive barkers and diggers should not be confined to the yard. Instead, housetrain the dog. A barker may be left away from neighbors in a room (easily sound-proofed) with a radio playing (both for white noise and comfort).

A digger may be left in the kitchen or in an outdoor concrete run with a small digging pit kept well stocked with toys and treats. After a week of daytime confinement in its run, if the dog is left in the yard with the door to its run open, the majority of the dog's excavations will now occur in the digging pit in its run.

Real Separation Anxiety

It is unfair to acknowledge that a dog is anxious and then do nothing about it. Whether it truly misses its owner or whether it grows anxious at the prospect of the owner's return, owners must realize that *they* have created the problem, so *they* should do something about it. First, stop punishing the dog during homecomings and, second teach the dog to weather unavoidable periods of social isolation.

Different breeds and different individual dogs are more dependent on their owners than

others. Often, however, the dog's dependency is exacerbated by the necessities of the owner's lifestyle and, also, unintentionally fostered by the owner's good intentions. If the dog is smothered with attention and affection when the owner is at home, it is more likely to become anxious when affection is withdrawn. Creating a Jekyll-and-Hyde environment produces a Jekyll-and-Hyde personality. The dog is as happy as a clam when the owner is at home but depressed, upset and anxious when the owner is away. The owner must endeavor to build up the dog's confidence so that it can cope with the stress of isolation and confinement. The only time the owner can realistically train the dog to cope with separation is when the owner is at home to train the dog. Here's how:

1. When Rover is eating his dinner, gnawing on a bone or sacked out enjoying a tummy-rub by the fire, play a piece of classical or soothing music. After a few recitals, the music will acquire secondary reinforcing properties: It becomes a *relaxation tape*. Relax with Rover!
2. Either put the dog in its confinement area, or let the dog have the run of the house and confine the owner to a single room to read a book. Turn on the relaxation tape and place some recently used and well-matured socks at the bottom of the door separating the dog and owner. The out-of-sight owner may monitor the dog's behavior and periodically reappear to praise the dog for good behavior, or to reprimand the dog for excessive noise or other inappropriate activity. Dogs quickly adapt to partial separation practiced regularly during evenings and weekends.

3. On Monday morning, with the dog in its safe haven, turn on the relaxation tape, close the door, put down the socks and then hurry off to work using an exit the dog can't see. The dog can smell the owner and hear the owner (the music), but it cannot see the owner. The sounds and smell normally associated with the owner's presence help reassure the dog during isolation.

Dr. Dunbar, a native of Hertfordshire, England is an animal behaviorist, veterinarian and author. He has developed a series of behavior booklets and a video, Sirius Puppy Training.