



NarpsUK Information Sheet Separation Related Behaviour

Separation-related behaviour problems in dogs are categorised as unwanted behaviour that only occurs when the dog is separated from his/her owner.

The most common behavioural signs are:

- destructive behaviour
- various types of vocalisation
- inappropriate elimination (toileting)

Other less frequent signs include:

- excessive salivation
- self-mutilation
- repetitive behaviour
- vomiting

One of the main differentiating features between separation-related behaviour and other behavioural disorders with similar signs is that the separation reaction is displayed soon after the departure of the owner, normally commencing within 30 minutes, and often within the first few minutes.

Learning to be left alone

In order to **prevent** separation anxiety developing, you need to teach your dog that being left alone at your house is a pleasant experience - spending time relaxing and doing enjoyable things.

- Gradually build up the amount of time that you leave your dog. The speed that you progress will depend on your dog's reaction.
- Never leave your dog so long that he/she starts to become distressed. **N.B. If you do have to go out and leave your dog for long periods of time as soon as you get him/her, arrange for friends or family to help out for a short while.**
- Reward your dog for being relaxed when left alone. Rewards can be toys, treats, cuddles or praise. If your dog becomes anxious and does not remain quietly in their bed, do not offer a reward. Instead simply go back a stage and try leaving your dog for a shorter period next time.

- Repeat each of the following stages until you are sure your dog is happy before progressing. How quickly you progress depends on how well your dog responds.

1. Start by asking your dog to go to his/her bed and stay there while you are present for a short while. Reward your dog for remaining quietly in his/her bed.

2. Next ask your dog to stay in his/her bed as you move away, then return and reward.

3. Move progressively further away and for longer. The distance and time that you increase by on each occasion will depend on your dog. If your dog reacts or moves, then don't reward but go back to the previous stage.

4. Start going out through the door before returning, then going out and shutting the door, then going out for longer periods of time. When you get to this point, start to vary the length of time that you are out.

5. Once you reach the stage where your dog is happy to be left for up to an hour, you should then have no problems leaving him/her for longer periods. To avoid boredom, which may lead to mischief, remember to give your dog something to occupy him/herself whilst you are out!

Prevent your dog from becoming bored

There are a number of things that you can do to give your dog something to occupy him/herself whilst you are away.

- Leave a toy or suitable bone with your dog when you go out. Make sure that this is a 'special' toy by only making it available to your dog when you go out, or when he/she is separated from you in another room of the house.
- Try to leave something that your dog really loves, such as a 'kong' stuffed with food (peanut butter or cheese mixed with dog biscuits are usually popular), or a meat-flavoured chew.
- Give your dog a treat ball or cube that you can fill with dried treats, designed to make your dog work out how to get the treat out.
- All of these things will give your dog mental stimulation and prevent him/her from becoming bored.
- Remember that when you return home, these 'special' items should be put away again and only given to your dog when you go out, or when you are in a different room of the house.

Feeding and exercise

Your dog will be more inclined to relax when left alone if he/she has had an appropriate amount of exercise and been fed before you go out.

- Try to always exercise your dog before leaving him/her. Take your dog for a 30-minute walk, returning home half an hour before you are due to leave.
- Feed your dog a small meal half an hour before leaving.

- Always ensure that your dog goes to the toilet before being left alone.

Avoid all punishment

If your dog misbehaves while you are out, it is vital that you do not react badly when you come home. Separation-related behaviour problems get worse when owners punish their dogs on their return. Your dog can only link his/her actions with the punishment if the punishment occurs within half a second of the behaviour. This means that punishment will be linked with your return, rather than the destruction, barking or toileting carried out some time previously. Your dog will then become anxious about what you will do when you return the next time he/she is left alone. As a result of this increased anxiety, the dog is more likely to chew or lose toilet control, making the problem even worse. Many dogs that have been punished in the past when their owners returned will show submission in an attempt to appease their owners. They make themselves as small as possible, putting their ears back and their tail between their legs. Unfortunately, owners often think that the dogs look guilty and punish them because they 'know they have done wrong'. Even if you take your dog to the scene of the crime, he/she will not be able to associate your anger with his/her behaviour hours earlier – your dog will simply become more anxious the next time you go out.

Although it is not easy, if you do find a mess when you come home, it is essential that you never physically punish or shout at your dog. Try to even avoid letting your dog see that you are annoyed – let him/her outside before cleaning up.