

## Preventing and Overcoming Separation Related Problems

Dogs are social animals who can form different types of attachment bonds with their caregivers, similar to how human children form different types of bonds with people. The four commonly known attachment bonds are *secure*, *insecure*, *avoidant*, and *anxious*.

Dogs with a *secure* attachment tend to be able to cope with their owner's absence. Dogs with other types of attachment are more at risk of suffering some sort of isolation distress. They may express their distress in a variety of ways, such as vocalizing or being destructive. Many people believe that when this happens their dog is suffering from "separation anxiety".

Separation anxiety is commonly treated as a diagnosis, but it should actually be classified as a syndrome. Think of it as an umbrella term that covers several different types of "Separation Related Problems" or SRPs.

Some of the different types of SRPs are:

**1. Dogs who fear being alone** –they may panic when separated from their attachment figure (usually a person, but can be another pet), or may panic when left alone even if they are not yet bonded with anyone

Signs may include:

- Barking/Whining/Howling repetitively, without pausing to listen for a reply
- Pacing, drooling, trembling
- Urinating/Defecating in the house
- Usually not very confident dogs in general, tend to have an *insecure* bond with their owner
- May be fine in a crate or room when owner is home
- Usually begins as owner is preparing to leave and/or within the first 30 minutes of the dog being left alone
- These dogs tend to be "Velcro" dogs, and follow their attachment figure everywhere

**2. Dogs who are bored** –their basic needs are not being met in full before they're left alone, or they have not been exposed to absence before

Signs may include:

- Barking repetitively
- Restlessness/difficulty settling
- Destructive chewing
- These behaviors may happen throughout the day in bursts, as the dog may tire out, sleep, then wake up and feel bored again



**3. Dogs who are frustrated** –they want to get to something outside, usually their person, but cannot, and do not know how to cope with the frustration

Signs may include:

- Barking/Howling with pauses in between (the dog is calling to someone and pauses to listen for a response)
- Destructive Chewing/digging (especially near exits such as doorways and windows)
- Barrier frustration (may not cope well being confined to a room/crate, even if owner is home)
- Generally confident dogs



### Helping your dog feel independent

*Independence is a natural process that starts when an animal feels secure, and grows from there.*



You cannot teach independence, but you can give security. Once your dog feels secure in their relationship with you, they will naturally become more comfortable when you are absent.

So, owners first have to be there to bond securely with a new puppy or rescue dog, but there are things you can do to encourage your dog to enjoy the world when you are not present.

### 3 Easy Ways to Prevent/Overcome Mild Separation Related Problems

**1. Make Micro Absences Fun!**

Make a list of ‘micro absences’. These are events when you leave your dog alone for only a few minutes at a time. Examples are:

- a. Going to the bathroom
- b. Having a quick shower
- c. Bringing shopping in from the car
- d. Having a bath

Every time you do one of these, scatter a portion of your dog’s food on the floor right before you go off to do what you need to do. (So if your dog follows you to the bathroom, drop a handful of kibble right outside the bathroom door and let them eat while you do your thing.)

**2. Tie Out Toys**

This must be carefully managed if there are multiple dogs in the home, as you don’t want one stealing the toy from the dog you’re trying to work with.



- a. Tie a really yummy toy (i.e. frozen kong, bone, peanut butter frisbee) somewhere your dog can find it
- b. Go into a different room to read, watch tv, etc. and let your dog have the ability to leave the room if they want
- c. Your dog will be rewarded if they choose to leave you and go exploring
- d. This encourages exploration without you being present, and builds confidence

### **3. Eat Away Dinners**

Set up a confinement area, such as a crate, x-pen, etc. that can be moved around

- a. Set it up near where you eat your meals
- b. Put your dog in and let them eat while you eat
- c. Each day move the area a little farther away from the table
- d. Just move the confinement area closer if your dog struggles, and try adding distance again on another day

## **3 Ways to Reduce Frustration When Alone**

Dogs who are bored or frustrated when left alone are not having all of their physical and mental needs met before their owner leaves them. Challenge yourself to change your dog's routine for 3 days and see if there's a difference in their behavior when they are alone!

### **1. Physical Stimulation** –Exercise at the right time

If we walk our dogs just before we leave, they are actually more awake and aroused (their temperature is higher and they have a rush of endorphins). A dog needs time to come down from the walk, especially dogs afraid of being alone (or they may associate the walk with you leaving, and become anxious during the walk). So, walk your dog for at least 30 minutes, but wait about an hour before leaving them alone.

### **2. Mental Stimulation with You**–Training using rewards, not force

After your walk, do 15 minutes of easy training with your dog. It can be fun stuff, like teaching your dog to spin, target an object, or work on your basic skills like sit and shake. This step is really helpful for fearful dogs, as it builds their confidence and strengthens their relationship with you. For frustrated dogs, you can work on leave it, stay, and out of sight stays, as these behaviors help improve frustration tolerance.

### **3. Mental Stimulation on Their Own** –Chew time

After your walk and training time, give your dog a food toy to work on. A frozen Kong or a filled bone are good examples. This allows your dog to settle down from their training and focus on something calmly while you finish getting ready to depart.





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Most of the time the above exercises are all a dog needs to feel comfortable when being left alone. If these tips are not working, you may have a more severe case on your hands and should reach out to a certified canine behaviorist.