



Canine Companions Rescue Center

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Separation Anxiety

Separation anxiety can be a mild problem or it can be incredibly destructive and frustrating. Dogs are social animals and can form very close bonds. A bond with your dog is a good thing, unless it becomes unhealthy. Dogs who receive a great deal of attention from their owners (holding them on your lap, excessive petting, etc.) may become contact addicts. They tend to stay very infantile and needy. The worst possible result is a dog who, when left alone, will soil the house, bark constantly, destroy the house, become masters of escape to follow you, or even cause bleeding wounds by gnawing or licking at themselves.

Whether you have a new puppy and want to prevent separation anxiety or you have an older dog with existing symptoms there are things you can do.

- Play constructive games with your dog instead of just sitting and petting them. Petting your dog is fine, but you shouldn't absentmindedly pet them for hours while watching tv. If your dog wants attention, give them a couple of pats on the head then tell them to get a toy. Play fetch or tug for awhile which will give your dog some exercise and form a healthy bond between you. When you're done, tell them "enough" and pay no more attention. Eventually they will learn to be comfortable without attention from you.
- Make sure your dog gets some confined quiet time. A crate is ideal (see the hand out on crate training) but a nearby room with a baby gate in the doorway will do. Make sure the room is dog proofed and that you aren't shutting the dog away from the family (isolating him). Give them these quiet times while you're at home. Leaving them in a crate all day while you're at work is not the same thing. Giving them quiet time while you're home will make being in the crate less stressful and give them a chance to become comfortable there. Assuming they are quiet you can let them out after ten or fifteen minutes. If they make a fuss then sit tight until they are quiet for five minutes or so then let them out. Never let them out when they are making a fuss!
- Don't make a big deal about leaving or coming home. A matter-of-fact "good-bye" and a cookie are sufficient for leaving, and a quiet "hello" and "let's go potty" are all you should do when you return. After you've been home for several minutes you can give them more enthusiastic attention.. If you load them with attention when you leave or return you will create a great deal of stress about being away from you.
- You can try leaving them with a radio or tv on, however, a tape recording of normal family activity would likely be more comforting.
- Distraction is another tactic to try. Leave a Kong or similar toy (hollowed out toy with holes in it) in their crate with them and place treats or peanut butter inside. This will give them something to work at and make your absence less obvious. Be careful not to provide too much food because this can cause house training issues as well as upset their stomach if they're already stressed about your departure.

Separation anxiety is a tricky problem and can be difficult to control on your own. If your dog is having trouble and you can't seem to make improvements you should seek the advice of an animal behaviorist without delay. Nipping the problem early on before the really bad habits have a chance to form is your best course of action.