

Separation Anxiety in Dogs

Separation anxiety in dogs is the fear or dislike of isolation which often results in undesirable behavior. Separation anxiety is one of the most common causes of canine behavioral problems (Polin 1992; Voith and Borchelt 1985).

As social animals, it is normal for puppies to form attachments to their mother and littermates. Once a puppy is separated from its family group, it becomes attached to its owner. Attachment implies a trusting relationship and is the foundation of a good, healthy bond between owner and pet (Polin 1992). However, when a dog becomes overly dependent on its owner, problem behaviors may result.

There are many problem behaviors associated with separation anxiety including: defecation and urination in inappropriate locations, destructive behavior, excessive barking and whining, depression, and hyperactivity. These behaviors may also be the symptoms of other problems. However, if undesired behaviors are clearly related to the absence of the owner, occur shortly after departure and a prolonged greeting response occurs upon the owner's return, separation anxiety is the probable cause (McElroy 1989). If a problem behavior has persisted for an extended period, a visit to the vet will ensure that there are no underlying medical problems.

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

Separation anxiety may occur in dogs with an abnormal predisposition to dependency (Machum 1991). Traumatic events in a young dog's life may also increase the likelihood of the development of very strong attachments. These events include; early separation from the bitch, deprivation of attachment early in life (puppies kept in pet shops or animal shelters), a sudden change of environment (new home, stay at a kennel), a change in owner's lifestyle which results in a sudden end to constant contact with the animal, a long-term or permanent absence of a family member (divorce, death, child leaving home) or the addition of a new family member (baby, pet) (Voith and Borchelt 1985; McElroy 1989).

SEPARATION-INDUCED BEHAVIORS

Every dog afflicted with separation anxiety reacts somewhat differently (Borchelt 1983). Some dogs only engage in one problem behavior while others may engage in several. Many dogs can sense when their owner is leaving and become anxious even before the owner leaves the house. The dog may follow the owner from room to room, whimper, shake or even become aggressive as the owner tries to depart (Voith and Borchelt 1985). The dog's anxiety level peaks within 30 minutes of departure and this is usually when most damage is done. Dogs displaying separation anxiety will often scratch and dig at doors and windows in an attempt to follow their owner. Chewing on household objects is also very common. Some dogs urinate and defecate in unacceptable



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locations such as by the door or on their owner's bed. Whining and barking for an extended period are also common concerns. Other dogs become depressed and will not eat or drink while their owner is gone. This is especially detrimental if the owner is gone for an extended period. In rare cases, dogs will have diarrhea, vomit or engage in self-mutilation such as chewing on themselves or excessive licking after being left alone. Most affected dogs will become overly excited when the owner arrives home and will engage in an unusually prolonged greeting (Voith and Borchelt 1985).

TREATMENT

Some methods for treating problem behavior include: punishment, crate-training, and obedience training. These methods are directed at the problem behavior; however they fail to address the source of the problem. By ignoring the source of the problems, one undesirable behavior may simply be replaced with another as the dog searches for an outlet for its anxiousness (Borchelt 1983). In addition, punishment is likely to be counterproductive and will only increase a dog's anxiety with each departure. Therefore, punishment is not recommended as an acceptable method of treating separation anxiety.

Presently, the most accepted method for treating separation anxiety involves planned departures. This method involves gradually adjusting the dog to being alone by exposure to many short departures. Because the stress response occurs very shortly after the owner's departure (within 30 minutes), the dog should only be left alone for very short intervals at first (seconds to minutes) to ensure the owner returns before the onset of anxiety. Before the departure period can be increased, the owner must be certain that the dog is not stressed. The owner must closely watch the dog for signs of anxiety and ensure that the dog does not engage in an extended greeting. After the short departures have reached the 30 minute mark, the length of time the dog is left can be increased by larger increments. Once the dog can be left alone for 1.5 hours, it can usually be left all day. Departure and return should be made as quiet and uneventful as possible to avoid overstimulating the dog. The dog should not be given attention prior to departures nor given attention and praise upon returns. Excessive attention prior to departure and upon return seem to increase the anxiety during separation and it does NOT make it easier on the dog as most people suspect. Safety cues may also be used to associate with the short departures (Voith and Borchelt 1985). The T.V. or radio can be left on or an acceptable chew toy may be provided for the dog. However, it is very important that the safety cue is not an item that the dog already associates with anxiety. These cues help the dog relate to a previous safe period of isolation.



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Anti-anxiety medications are sometimes used to suppress anxiety. These are often used on dogs with severe separation anxiety or when owners simply must leave the dog alone for an extended period while treatment is occurring. The use of drugs allows the dog to spend extended periods of time free of anxiety. However, in most cases, drugs do not offer a solution and should be used in combination with a treatment program. A vet should be consulted for further information on the safest and most effective anxiety-suppressing drugs.

In severe cases the owner may also have to take steps to weaken the dog's dependency upon a person. This requires the owner to ignore the dog for a period of time, sometimes up to three weeks (Flannigan, Personal comm.). This will not break the bond between owner and dog but it will decrease the dog's extreme dependency and allow it to tolerate its owner's absence without anxiety (Machum 1991). Ignoring your favorite pet may be difficult but it is important to keep in mind that a much more healthy and happy relationship will result.

PREVENTION

When a puppy or new dog is brought into the home, it is important to avoid situations that may encourage an excessive attachment to develop. Your dog should slowly become accustomed to staying alone (Voith and Borchelt 1985). This can be accomplished by crate-training when the pup is young. As well, ensuring that the dog does not constantly follow the owner and gradually adjusts to being alone in the house will go a long way toward a healthy owner-pet relationship.

SUMMARY

If you think your pet may be the victim of separation anxiety it is important to take measures to alleviate the problem soon. Unfortunately it is not something that will simply disappear with time. Your vet may be able to help get a treatment program started or could refer you to an animal behaviorist who may be more familiar with treatment alternatives. It is important to remember that your pet is not bad or trying to make life miserable - although it sometimes may feel that way! Your pet is the victim of a disorder that can be treated. Prognosis for recovery is excellent if you are willing to spend time working with your pet (Voith and Borchelt 1985). If early attempts on your own fail to decrease your pet's anxiety, contact a professional who may be able to point out a critical detail that others less experienced with behavioral disorders may overlook.

