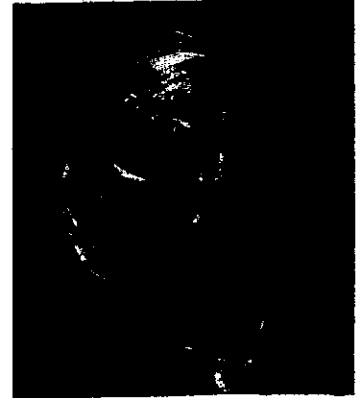


ASK THE TRAINER

Separation anxiety and your pup

Each month we will be sharing your questions with our friend Susan Sarubin, CCBC-KA, CPDT-KA to help with some of your concerns and questions about your pets. Susan is a certified professional canine behavior consultant and trainer, and serves on the Board of Directors of Talbot Humane.

My dog is a 3-year-old Siberian Husky/German Shepherd mix. We adopted her about a year ago and she is generally very well-behaved. However, when my husband and I leave her alone at home, she destroys things. She has ripped up curtains and cushions, chewed on the door trim, and pooped on the floor and carpeting. When she's in her crate, she somehow moves it across the floor, and almost always messes in it. Our neighbor said that sometimes she barks almost nonstop when we're gone. This is the ONLY time she does this! When we're here, she's perfectly normal and doesn't chew up anything or mess in the house. Do you have any ideas or suggestions for this MAJOR problem?



If it is any consolation to you, destructive behavior and inappropriate elimination are two of the most common problems we experience with our dogs. These problems are not only great source of frustration to the owner, but obviously the dog is none too happy either!

Destructive behavior in dogs is due to various reasons, including normal teething in puppies, playful, exploratory behavior, attention seeking behavior, social isolation (little interaction with humans, such as a "backyard dog"), or separation anxiety. From the details you have shared regarding the circumstances surrounding your dog's destructive behavior and inappropriate elimination, separation anxiety appears to be what your dog is experiencing. The pattern of destructive behavior associated with separation anxiety only and always occurs in the absence of the dog's owner...it does not occur when the owner is home. Your dog is not mad at you, being spiteful or rebellious, or simply bored, she is behaving out of fear and anxiety. Essentially, she is having a panic attack each time you leave her alone.

There may also be other signs you recognize in your dog that are common in dogs with separation anxiety: following you around the house ("Velcro dog"), greeting you frantically when you return, demanding your attention, and showing signs of stress when you are preparing to leave the house (panting, whining, pacing, following you around).

In the short term, you need a way to manage or control your dog's behavior, as well as provide her relief from her extreme anxiety. Is it possible for you to leave your dog with someone, such as a family member, when you are not home? For some dogs, Doggie Day Care or boarding during the day may also be options. Or maybe your dog could accompany you on some shorter outings. Crating a dog with separation anxiety may make the problem worse, although confining her to a room where she can do minimal damage may be necessary. Other measures that may be helpful are increasing her exercise prior to you leaving, making sure she has eliminated outside, and giving her interactive toys (food dispensing toys, such as a treat-stuffed Kong) that will initially occupy her when you leave...be sure to give her interactive toys at other times as well so she does not associate them only with you leaving. You may also speak with your Vet

about giving your dog medication to decrease her level of anxiety, keeping in mind that this is not a long-term solution for separation anxiety.

In the long term, treating separation anxiety in a dog may be a slow and labor-intensive process that necessitates a strong commitment from the owner and help from a qualified, experienced trainer or behaviorist. Behavior modification medication may aid in the training process, reducing the dog's anxiety enough to facilitate learning in training. The goal of behavior modification treatment is to be able to leave the dog alone without feeling anxious. This is accomplished through counter-conditioning and desensitization procedures, including changing your dog's associations with being left alone, gradually increasing duration of your absence only when your dog is without anxiety for a shorter duration. Someone experienced in these procedures can work with you on an appropriate behavior modification plan for treating your dog. Separation anxiety responds well to these procedures, so, if you commit to helping your dog, you have good reason to be optimistic.

Book Recommendations:

1) I'll Be Home Soon! How to Prevent and Treat Separation Anxiety Patricia B. McConnell, Ph.D.

2) Don't Leave Me! Step-by-Step Help for Your Dog's Separation Anxiety Nicole Wilde, CPDT-KA

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