



Handling Common Dog Behaviour Issues

Separation Anxiety, Destructive Chewing

Some dogs find the departure of their human companions very stressful. A variety of unpleasant behaviours can occur, including howling and barking all day, destructive chewing or accidents in the house, because of the physical effects of that anxiety. Most dogs with separation anxiety can be helped through behaviour modification on the part of the owner. If your dog suffers from severe separation anxiety and starts causing himself bodily harm, you should consult your veterinarian as well as a professional behaviourist.

A family's daily absences from the household are a fact of life. Many families are gone from home for at least eight hours. Make your arrivals and departures part of your dog's routine. First, we recommend the use of a crate. When introduced properly, a crate can be a safe haven for most dogs and will help provide them with a feeling of security. For dogs that may be chewing destructively, this will not only protect your material and sentimental possessions, but in turn will protect your dog from items that could potentially cause them physical harm. This will help reduce the anxiety when the family returns home, anticipating what their dog may have gotten into. If a crate is not an option, you will need to confine your dog in an area where the dog will feel comfortable and can easily be maintained as a "dog-proof" area.

Start slowly. Using short quick sessions, place your dog in their crate or safe area with a good chew toy, a meal or something that they are normally engaged by. Leave your dog's view for a very brief moment. Reward your dog with calm praise or treats for maintaining a calm and quiet demeanour. This should gradually build to more extended periods of time and incorporate such things as opening your door and simulating your departure.

Hello, Hello and Saying Good-bye

Are you making your dog's separation anxiety worse? Many owners feel guilt ridden when preparing to leave their dogs for the day. What many people perceive as reassuring their dog only makes the situation worse. Dogs are very perceptive to our emotions. Many people anxiously shower them with love and kisses and constant attention right before they walk out the door. "Oh Max, I love you so much, you be a good boy, don't worry, mama will be back before you know it." After such personal attention, our immediate departure no doubt comes as a very big shock to the dog, and leaves them feeling worried and anxious. Upon returning home, many humans can't get to the door fast enough and make a big fuss about how happy they are to be back home, "Oh I missed you so much Max!" Your departures and arrivals have become very big events to your dog.

When you leave for the day, place your dog in their crate or area about five to ten minutes prior to your departure. Make sure you provide the dog with something they will find stimulating. This will take the focus off of you. When you leave, say nothing or simply a little "Bye Max, see you later."

When you arrive home, don't run to your dog immediately. Say nothing or a simple "Hi Max, mommy's home." Put down your bags, hang up your jacket and take a minute to relax. This requires restraint on the human's part. Max will be okay for a few minutes and you most likely have the whole evening to look forward to. Go let your dog out of his crate or area and take him outside to relieve himself. Wait a few minutes until outside or after coming back before showering your dog with attention.

Destructive chewing can go hand in hand with separation anxiety. Dogs have a natural desire to chew on things and chewing is usually a very soothing outlet for the dog's anxiety. Not only can a destructive chewer ruin many of your household items, this type of unsupervised chewing can be a big health risk to your dog. Most veterinarians are happy to recount stories of the unusual items they have seen canine companions consume. Determining the level of your dog's chewing requirements will help in your quest for safe and suitable chewing items. Some dogs may be happy to carry a stuffed animal around for years while others may remove the stuffing in minutes. Chew toys also vary in their strengths, so sometimes investing in one good and slightly more expensive chew toy will far out weigh purchasing less chew resistant products. 'Kong' toys can be a saviour to an owner with a dog that likes to chew.

Fear and Shyness

Some shelter dogs have had very hard pasts or may never have been socialized properly. If your dog starts to exhibit fear or shyness around people or new things, it is your job to show the dog these things are okay and there is no reason to worry. When your dog becomes upset by a situation, do not baby your dog. This means no panicked human voices "reassuring" your dog it is okay; this is actually only reassuring that there is reason for the dog to worry. Act like the situation is no big deal.

Resource Guarding

Many dogs have a tendency to guard objects they perceive as valuable. Some dogs may be possessive of locations such as the sofa or bed, their owner or objects such as empty food bowls, raw hides or sticks, to name a few. Similarly, some dogs do not enjoy being handled in specific regions on their body.

If you discover your dog is possessive around certain items or people, it is recommended that you consult with a knowledgeable trainer who has experience in treating resource guarding using desensitization and counter-conditioning, not punishment. In the meantime, every effort should be made to manage the environment your dog is in to ensure the trigger object is not present or your dog is not around other people or dogs when near the person they have chosen to guard.

If you are faced with an emergency situation where your dog has somehow acquired a valued object, you may wish to try to "bait and switch" by quickly and calmly bribing the dog with food or a toy. Do not attempt to confront, reprimand or wrestle a dog that is guarding an object or person. You will compromise your dog's trust and you may become injured during the altercation. Bribery is not meant to be used instead of proper training, but in emergency situations you may have to use it as a last resort.