

Home-Along Dogs

TIPS FOR DE-STRESSING EXITS AND ENTRANCES

by Jennifer Kyzer

Imagine this scenario: A friend comes over to visit with her 3-year-old daughter. The child plays for a few minutes then gets up, says goodbye, and walks out the front door by herself. It is not hard to relate to the mother, who is responsible for keeping the 3-year-old safe and happy, being distraught, shocked, and devastated. From a dog's perspective – if your relationship is one in which your dog feels a responsibility to make you happy, to take care of you, and to keep you all together, that's how it can feel when you leave him. Typically, separation anxiety is a learned behavior that stems from an unbalanced relationship with your dog. Whining, barking, drooling, panting, pacing, and destroying are all signs of anxiety. Over-excitement as the family returns home is also a sign that your dog may experience distress when you are gone. If the behaviors of anxiety become severe, this can lead to further distress and anxiety for the dog, as

well as for the family.

Changing the relationship you have with your dog can have a significant positive effect on separation anxiety. Reducing arousal when you leave and come home, promoting a leader-follower relationship, using calming techniques, giving your dog mental and physical work, and being conscious of free affection will decrease anxious behaviors.

To reduce arousal around exits and entrances, consider setting a calm mood with white noise or soothing music and quieting the environment before leaving the house. Do not engage your pup with reassuring phrases like *It's okay, I'll be home soon*, or *Don't worry*, as this type of talk typically increases stress. Rushing out the door while in a frantic state can also upset your dog. Instead, try to incorporate a routine of calm exits – difficult for most of us, I know, but valuable for our pets.

When you come home, ignore your dog for a few minutes while going about your business as if you did not have a dog to calm the environment. In addition, proper crate training can help create an appropriate ritual for entrances and exits.

A leader-follower relationship, in which you are the leader and your pup is the follower, is important for dogs that experience separation anxiety. An easy way to promote this relationship is to initiate interaction. This involves engaging your dog in each interaction, as opposed to your dog demanding, and receiving, interaction. You can engage your dog by first saying his name in a light, fun voice to get his attention, then follow that by a command such as *come, sit, down, or stay*. Reward your dog's compliance with verbal praise, treats, or petting.

Calming techniques include placing your hand or hands gently but firmly on your dog, taking deep breaths, and not moving your hand until your dog gets to a calmer state. Remember, a key to helping your dog become calm is getting yourself to a calm state first.

Your dog's mental and physical work can include structured walks, fetch, and other games, and dog puzzles. You should integrate short training sessions (30 to 90 seconds) throughout your daily schedule. By having your dog work for you on a regular basis, he is earning rewards (affection, praise, play time, etc.) as opposed to you just giving him rewards for free.

As the kids head back to school and the house is empty more often, training your dog to be calm and content when you are gone is crucial to easing the overall stress and anxiety level of your pet. Working on the above strategies will help the transition go smoothly. ■



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